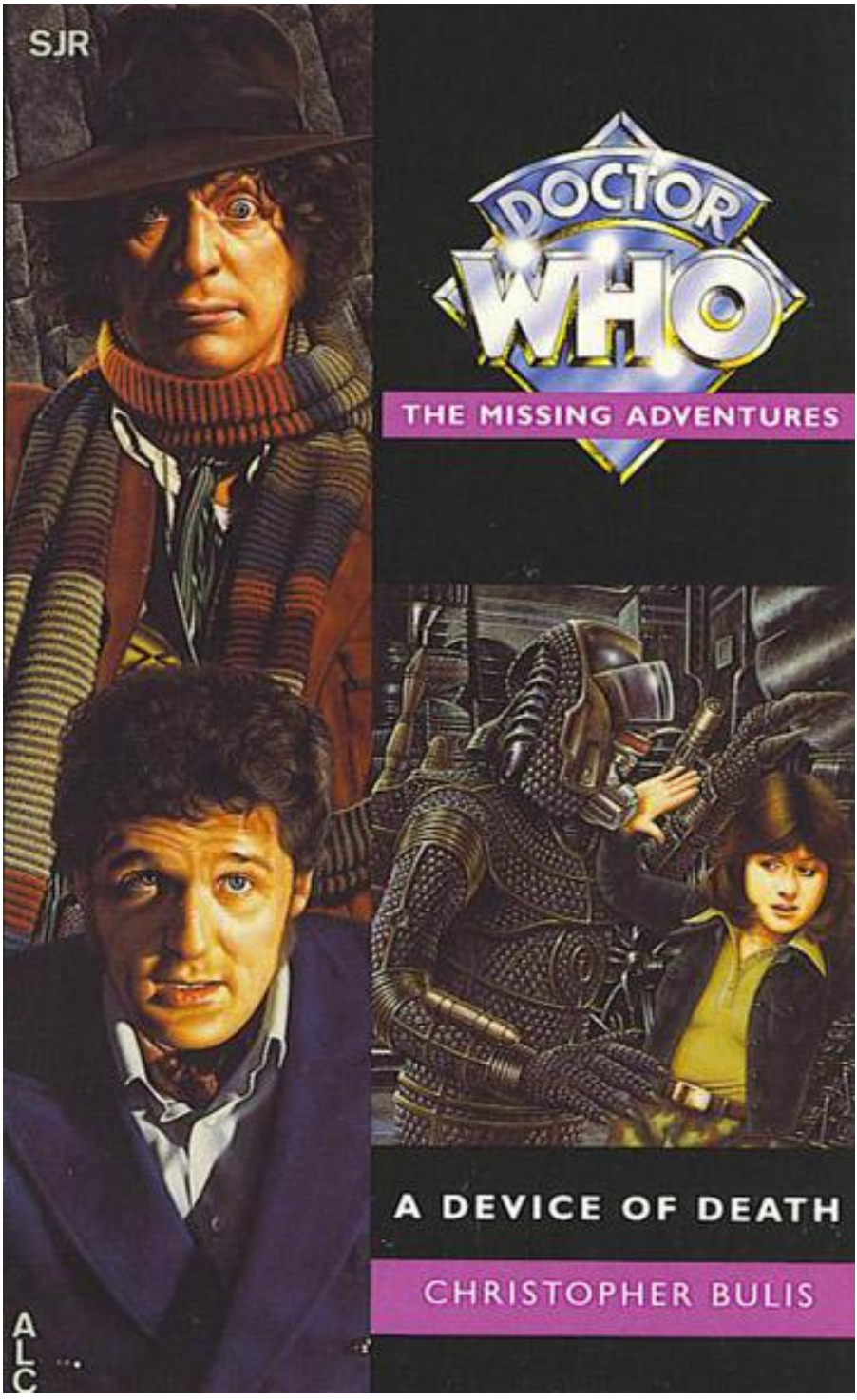
DOCTOR WHO

THE MISSING ADVENTURES

A DEVICE OF DEATH

CHRISTOPHER BULIS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A D E V I C E O F D E A T H

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL FEATURING THE FOURTH DOCTOR, SARAH JANE SMITH AND HARRY SULLIVAN.

‘AS A MEMBER OF AN INFERIOR RACE, YOU EITHER

WORK TO SERVE THE CAUSE OF AVERON, OR DIE.’

Sarah is marooned on a slave world where the only escape is death. Harry is caught in the middle of an interplanetary invasion, and has to combine medicine with a desperate mission. And the Doctor lands on a world so secret it does not even have a name.

Why have the TARDIS crew been scattered across the stars? What terrible accident could have wiped the Doctor’s memory? And what could interest the Time Lords in this war-torn sector of space?

At the heart of a star-spanning conspiracy lies an ancient quest: people have been making weapons since the dawn of time – but perhaps someone has finally discovered the ultimate device of death.

This adventure takes place between the television stories

GENESIS OF THE DALEKS *and* ***REVENGE OF THE CYBERMEN****.*

Christopher Bulis *has written five previous* ***Doctor Who*** *books, including the highly acclaimed* ***The Sorcerer’s Apprentice****.*

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A DEVICE OF

DEATH

Christopher Bulis

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Dedication

To my Mother —

A story about her favourite Doctor

Prologue

Timequake

ime cracked down the middle.

T Opposing realities ground together like shifting continental plates. The probability rift ran through the ages, widening and branching, forming myriad tendrils that insinuated themselves into the timelines of a dozen galaxies, threatening to unravel the tapestry of the past, to turn tomorrow on its head and make fiction out of a trillion history texts as it passed.

Which was exactly what they expected would happen.

The score or so temporal engineers and causality monitors seated at their consoles in the Parachronistic Chamber, buried deep under the Capitol of Gallifrey, continued with their assigned tasks unperturbed. It would have been unseemly to show any signs of doubt or apprehension, even in the shadow of the vast forces that had just been unleashed. After all they were Time Lords. They had learnt to master such crises before half the civilizations in the galaxy had invented the wheel.

Brastall, Senior Monitor and Cardinal of the Arcalian Chapter, studied the great fifth-dimensional hyperglobe display that hung in the centre of the chamber. It showed the rift, colour-coded a particularly intense scarlet, spreading into futurity like spilled blood. 'Magnitude?' he enquired mildly.

'Four point six on the Rassilon scale, your Grace,' came the steady reply. 'Within projected parameters.'

'Initiate dampening sequence delta three.'

Hands moved rapidly across the controls, releasing the total power of disintegrating matter from the depths of a collapsed star. Invisible time fields arrayed in hyperspace about the space-time coordinates of the planet Skaro contracted. Chronic resonance dampers slammed into place. Time dams and tachyon mirrors controlled and redirected the flow as the probability bow wave washed out into the universe, diluting and slowing the change to manageable proportions. In the depths of the globe the scarlet tide began to thin and disperse as reality absorbed the surge and closed in on itself once more to form a stable, if slightly modified, configuration. On a thousand worlds the Dalek wars would become a fading memory, then a myth, then nothing. They would never have occurred.

'Temporal flux diminishing,' a monitor announced.

'Damping now at eighty-seven per cent and rising.'

Brastall sat back in his chair and allowed a slight smile of satisfaction to cross his lips. You do not attempt to deflect the destiny of an entire race without being prepared to manage the consequences, of both success or failure, for those their malign influence had affected. It was just a pity they had only partially succeeded. Due to the efforts of their agent and his companions the expansion of the Dalek empire had been delayed, but not halted. Perhaps a thousand worlds had been saved for now, but it should have been millions. It was a poor

workman who blamed his tools of course, but he couldn't help wondering if the Doctor had been the right choice, despite his past experience of the Daleks. A Prydonian after all, and hardly an outstanding one at that. More of a troublemaker than anything else from his record, even if he did seem to have a knack of associating with primitive races. Still, the decision to use him had been made by the High Council, and it was Brastall's duty to carry out their wishes despite any personal reservations.

'Monitor Taxos,' Brastall said, 'have you a fix on the Time Ring?'

'Yes, your Grace. On screen.' A green trace like a tiny comet appeared within the globe, its head pointing away from Skaro and towards the future. 'Replacement TT capsule programmed and awaiting dispatch.'

'Begin rendezvous sequence.'

Taxos bent over his controls and Brastall smiled again.

They were not finished with the Doctor yet.

The first monitor continued his count. The red threads had almost vanished from the display. 'Damping now at ninety-nine point seven eight per cent...point eight three...point eight eight...and holding.'

Brastall frowned. 'Holding? The counter damping must be total.'

The monitor spoke again, a slight edge to his words. 'Your Grace, one energy filament has escaped the containment fields and is folding in on itself. It's forming loose vortex – scale seven.'

'Display location and trajectory.'

The globe showed the new vortex picked out by a halo of pulsing blue light. Even as Brastall watched it converged with the green comet, the only other moving trace in the globe.

'It's following the Time Ring's artron trail,' said Taxos.

The two traces merged and sparkled. Then the red was gone, leaving only the green now motionless and flickering unsteadily.

'Vortex energy absorbed. Damping now one hundred per cent,' the first monitor said quietly.

'And the Ring?' Brastall demanded.

‘Projected time path disrupted.’ Taxos scanned his instruments anxiously. ‘They will materialize short of planned coordinates.’ In the globe the green spot of light broke into three. ‘The Time Ring is overloading. Fail-safe has come into operation. Dividing to bleed off excess energy. Two ring pseudo-elements and passengers now materializing. Estimated eighty-five and fifty-one per cent chance of survival, respectively. Losing prime element. Estimated survival factor three per cent and falling.’

‘Reprogram the replacement capsule. Set discrimination for homing in on the Doctor’s time trace.’

Taxos’s hands flew over the controls. ‘Capsule dispatched.’

He turned a concerned face to Brastall. ‘But, Your Grace, what about the Doctor’s companions?’

‘The Doctor’s safety must take priority for the moment.’

Brastall sighed heavily. ‘I believe humans place great store in luck. Let us hope for their sakes it is justified.’

1

Trooper

6025D scanned the rugged stretch of rising ground before 3 it and compared the results with its previous map, updating details of changes where necessary and noting the position of new enemy emplacements. It was quite dark, except for a scattering of stars, but that did not hinder its survey in the least. Neither did the almost continuous explosions of the ballistic barrage currently sweeping across the hillside. Survey completed, it consulted its internal timebase. The barrage was due to end in twenty-eight seconds and then the advance would begin.

It was aware of the other troopers preparing to lead their columns into battle, and of the massed ranks of the local Alliance forces in the dugouts behind them. From the signs it interpolated anxiety in the Tarracosian ranks. This was perfectly normal and it projected this condition would soon be alleviated. One of 36025D’s subtler functions was to instil courage by example.

‘Come on, men,’ section leaders would shout just before they went into action, ‘show me you’ve got as much *chezz* as that machine!’

‘ *Chezz*’, 36025D had learnt, was a local colloquialism for courage and bravery, therefore the rationale behind the statement was strictly speaking illogical. Since 36025D was not designed to experience fear, except as an abstract concept, it could not therefore be brave. But its presence combined with similar if more lurid exhortations seemed to produce the desired results, which in turn satisfied its programming.

Beyond that 36025D had no curiosity, doubt or desire. It was the perfect fighting machine.

Exactly on time the barrage ceased with a round of smoke shells. The suspension within the thick clouds dispersed thermal, optical and micro wavelengths. Effectively it reduced visibility to a couple of metres. 36025D started forward into the murk. Tarracosians swarmed out of foxholes and trenches behind it and followed on.

Enemy beams stabbed at random through the smoke, several impacting on 36025D’s body shell. It assessed the damage inflicted as minor and acceptable and continued on, dropping its visor to protect its optical system and main sensors. This left it without long-range senses except acoustic.

However, it continued firing its semi-portable cannon in precise blasts, targeting the suspected Garvantine positions it had identified earlier by inertial guidance and geometric computation.

There were cries of pain from the ranks behind it as men fell, but 36025D continued on up the hill as it had been ordered. Then a solid projectile struck its chest and exploded.

It staggered backwards for a moment, assessed the gross damage, bypassed critical systems, and continued on. Ten steps later sensory feedback from its lower limbs vanished. Its legs began to jerk erratically and it had to cut motive power to them. 36025D sank to its knees.

Check for secondary damage to sensor circuits.

Its arms grew numb, and the semi-portable clattered to the ground.

No secondary damage. Progressive sensory and motor control failure unrelated to any single injury.

Its stabilizer sensor cut out and its internal gyro disengaged.

It toppled forward.

System failure spreading – analyse possible causes.

Its visual receptors started to fail. Faintly it heard somebody shout, ‘The synth is down.’

Its analysis revealed a theoretical explanation for the spreading corruption of its systems. It assessed the situation with its rapidly failing faculties and took the only logical action. Blackness closed in and all sensory input faded. But in that moment as the power that sustained its higher functions drained away and its processors shut down, 36025D experienced irrationality for the first time in its existence. And it asked a question of itself for which there was no programmed response.

Was it going to die?

2

Deepcity

irector Kambril’s voice boomed from the lab’s monitor Dscreen on which his compact, solid features were presently framed: ‘…and confirm that the pressures are within tolerance levels. Lab five: where is that new interface configuration? Well, get it on line, man! Lab three.’

A bun of grey hair tilted back as Academ Cara Tarron looked up from her console. ‘Yes, Director?’

‘Is that universal pivot-bearing sheath modification ready yet?’

‘Any moment now, Director,’ Tarron said, glancing across the arc of consoles to a test bench where a huddle of technicians were taking readings from a wired-up prototype.

One of them looked up and made an optimistic circle with thumb and forefinger. ‘In fact its specifications are just being entered now.’

‘Thank you, Cara,’ Kambril said. ‘That completes your lab’s schedule.

You may stand down.' His head turned to one side as he glanced at another monitor. 'Lab five, Academ Farris! That interface...' The sound muted.

The personnel in Tarron's lab sat back from their consoles, stretched and yawned and exchanged trivial comments.

Individual consoles were powered down and screens went dark. Somebody opened the blinds, the slats turning with a dry rattle, letting afternoon sun pour in through the lab's long windows to catch the dust motes in their slow sparkling dance.

Outside a purple haze was already filling the shadows on the far side of the Valley, but the chequerwork of the testing grounds was still brightly illuminated. A thread of smoke was rising from zone Desert Two, Cara noticed, and wondered what unit was under trial. She made the rounds, dispensing words of approval and encouragement to her team as appropriate.

Gradually the chatter died away as all eyes shifted to the big screen beside the Director's monitor, where the slowly rotating tri-dee schematic showed the final assembly. At the top of the screen was the legend:

M.I.C.A./VERSION 1.0/PROVISIONAL INTEGRATION

One by one, driven by the Director's hectoring insistence, each laboratory finished its particular tasks, and the various components slotted into place on the display. The monitor volume swelled again.

'All labs have now completed their programs,' Kambril announced. 'Assembly is now concluded. Awaiting confirmation from Central Computer.'

Even after all these years, Tarron could still feel the anticipation rising until it was as tangible as the haze in the Valley, and she realized guiltily that she had been holding her breath. On the monitor Kambril's broad mouth suddenly widened and his square jaw lifted. 'We have validation. MICA has been provisionally accepted for trial production.'

The rest of his words were drowned by the cheering and applause, distant echoes of which were audible from the other laboratories on the open sound channel. In Tarron's laboratory, backs were slapped and hands shaken, and a few exchanged comradely hugs of delight. On the monitor Kambril could be seen smiling and nodding. After a

few moments he raised his hands for calm, and spoke gravely.

‘I think it is a suitable moment to remind ourselves of the great purpose behind the work we have done today. Please stand.’

There was a scraping of chairs as they did so, and Tarron knew the action was being repeated in every laboratory on the link. In contrast to the noisy exuberance of the previous minutes the solemn silence ached to be filled. Her heart beat unsteadily for a moment as she felt the old memories stirring.

‘We all share and acknowledge our greatest loss,’ Kambril continued. ‘In remembrance of our beloved home and in the name of justice, we seek rebalance. By whatever means, and at whatever cost, we of Deepcity know our purpose: to end the war, to break the Union, and bring death to Averon!’

And as always Kambril’s simple words seemed to trigger some sort of catharsis within Tarron. The bleakness of the past was overwhelmed by a growing sense of pride in their struggle and a fierce unquenchable anger. All doubts were cast aside as everybody in the lab was caught up in a tide of wild emotion.

Not the satisfaction in overcoming the abstract problems involved in creating MICA that they had expressed earlier.

Now they were giving voice to a darker, more basic need: vengeance. And Cara, a composed and temperate scientist of middle years, was pounding the air with her fist and repeating the chant with the rest of her colleagues:

‘Death to Averon! Death to Averon!’

That evening Cara Tarron was working alone in laboratory three, and the room was in darkness except for a single light burning over her console. The heavy inner lab door swung open and Elyze Brant bustled in clutching her familiar and well-worn memory pad. Brant was a small energetic woman a couple of years older than Tarron. She ran Deepcity’s Supply Department with legendary efficiency.

‘Sorry I’m calling late, Cara. But I was just checking if there are any special items you want. There’ll be a cargo ship calling soon and I know you scientists forget to put in requisitions on time then complain later when you run short.’

Tarron smiled, rubbing her eyes. ‘You know us too well.

Yes, there was something: more of those N5 crystal units. I've got the specs note somewhere.' She rummaged amongst a stack of paper notes on her desk, squinting tiredly.

Brant frowned at her old friend. 'Why are you working so late? I thought MICA had just passed on to the next stage?'

'It has,' agreed Tarron, finding the required slip at last and handing it over, 'but that just means another set of headaches to come. I was just planning a test program. MICA works in theory and in lab tests, but we've been rushed into full-scale production because they need it badly out in the field. The first prototypes will have to be checked as they come off the line and there are bound to be modifications required –'

'Cara!' Brant spoke firmly. 'No weapon is worth our best designer cracking up through overwork. If you don't stop right now I'll speak to the Director and he'll order you to rest.

When is your next leave due?'

Before Tarron could reply the lab door swung open again and Neels Prander entered, radiating his usual cheerful vigour.

He was twenty years younger than the two women.

'Hello, Aunty Cara – and Aunty Elyze as well. I am lucky.

I was just wondering if you had those assembly schematics ready?'

'Neels – not now,' Brant said sharply. 'Cara's too tired.'

'No, it's all right,' Tarron insisted, rummaging for a folder,

'I have them here.'

Prander took the proffered sheaf of printouts and flipped through them. 'So, this is the new beast? Deceptively harmless-looking thing when it's at rest, isn't it? Can't see how you make it perform as it's supposed to, but then I never was much of a theoretician. Each to their own. You build them, I'll provide the necessary illustrations for simple soldiers in the field to operate them. At the speed MICA is being put into production they'll be shipping it away before the manuals are ready.'

'MICA is totally self-programming, so you won't have much work to

do,' Tarron said.

'Trying to put me out of a job, eh? Then I'll have to put on my artist's hat and get started on the portraits for the official record.' Then his light bantering manner briefly fell away and he spoke in quiet earnest. 'When this is all over, your work here must be properly appreciated. It's as important as anything they do on the front line, remember that. It must be recorded in essence, not merely in photographs, and that's a job for paint and brush.' Then he smiled brightly again and started towards the door, only to turn on his heel. 'By the way, I hope I can count on you to support the drama society's latest effort?'

'What are you doing?' Tarron asked.

'A comedy. Thought we'd revive Thurbon's *Under the Green Moon*.'

'Well, maybe.'

'Come to the rehearsals. A bit of stage play is the best thing for relaxation, isn't it, Aunty Elyze?'

'I suppose so – but please stop calling me "Aunty".'

'But I like to think of you as my honorary aunts, not having any of my own,' said Prander unabashed, as he smiled cheerily and departed.

Tarron smiled after him until she saw her friend's pinched expression. 'What's the matter?'

'Nothing...except, well, Neels can get a bit...tiresome at times.'

'I know, but maybe it's just what we need. I appreciate the effort he makes to bridge the gap with us seniors. I think I will lend a hand with this new play of his.'

'Must you?'

'Now who was telling me to take a rest before he came in?

Change is as good as, and so on.' She frowned and sighed heavily. 'You know, it isn't the pressure of work that gets me down so much, it's the feeling of being trapped. When I first came here I thought the City and the Valley were huge, but now I wish I could simply go for a very long walk. Over the mountains and on and on.'

'You know that's not possible. It wouldn't be safe.'

‘I know.’

Brant looked at her with growing concern. ‘Maybe you should put in for early leave. A few weeks on Oceanus –’

‘More islands, just like the Valley. With City people for company.’

‘But it’s safe.’

‘Of course – because it’s so much dead sea it’s not worth fighting for. Even the Union don’t want it. I want to go somewhere that matters and meet new people. Even Prander has done that.’

‘As a war artist. He’s not a top systems designer. And it wasn’t a holiday.’

‘Of course. But battle zone research could be very useful. I don’t like working with second-hand information. I’m still fit enough and I don’t mind the risks.’

Brant spoke sternly. ‘Cara, listen to me. You’re far too valuable to risk. Much more than Prander. All you specialists are. And, frankly, you know too much if the enemy ever captured you. Please, just make do with the reports and films and recovered specimens. That’s how it has to be.’

Tarron sagged back in her chair in glum resignation. ‘I know, Elyze. I’m sorry. It’s just that I miss home so much.’

Brant patted her shoulder, but could find no more words to say.

Brant was a few minutes late for the regular meeting in the main conference room the next morning. When she did finally bustle in and the security door closed behind her, the other members of what was colloquially known as the ‘city council’

were already seated. Scout was standing in his usual place behind Kambril’s chair.

‘My apologies, Director, everyone,’ she said as she took her own seat. ‘Details of the next supply run to arrange.’

Kambril smiled tolerantly. ‘You are excused, Admin Brant.

We know how diligently you work. But now we are all here, perhaps we can begin. Colonel Andez had something he wanted to –’

‘Excuse me, Director,’ Brant interrupted anxiously, ‘but I must first report a possible case of Deep Syndrome affecting one of our most valuable workers.’

Kambril frowned. ‘And who would this be?’

‘Academ Cara Tarron, senior systems designer.’

‘Cara? Why, she was on top form the other day. Her work on MICA seems to be of excellent quality.’

‘She’s been driving herself too hard, that’s part of the problem. And last night she suggested field research as an excuse to visit off-world, and there were the usual background feelings of guilt and loss. And of course being restricted and shut in here – the classic symptoms.’

‘I see. Anything we can do to improve the working environment, Mr Lassiter?’

Deepcity’s chief engineer scratched his thinning hair and scowled. ‘It’s about as ideal as we can make it physically, Director. Some redesigning of the recreational areas might help, but it would only be palliative. People are complex animals and sometimes respond to factors beyond my ability to measure. The City is enclosed by its nature and while the Valley is big it’s clearly limited. Nothing we can do can change that.’

Kambril nodded. ‘Well, you might submit any suggestions.

Meanwhile, as you say, Admin Brant, Tarron is one of our most valuable and experienced designers. I’ll ask Dr Emberley to take a look at her. Prescribe some rest.’ He jotted a note on his pad. ‘Now, Colonel.’

Colonel Andez, Deepcity’s military liaison officer said,

‘Actually, Director, it’s a matter Lieutenant Oban has brought to my notice. Lieutenant.’

Oban was a cool and correct woman of about thirty, who oversaw Deepcity’s military transport and communication divisions. She operated the conference room controls as she spoke, closing the blinds remotely and illuminating the large display screen.

‘We have been receiving reports over the past few days of an unidentified craft seen in this sector by various ships, both in hyper

and interplanetary space. A few rather poor quality images have been recorded.' The screen showed a blurred view of a long golden form with the suggestion of fluting down its sides. Another angle showed a section of improbably curved oversized fin. 'We cannot match the design with the vessels of any known world in the cluster, and because no attempt at communication was made, we know nothing of the nature of its occupants. It is also very fast, perhaps faster than anything we have, which is reason enough for concern. We must face the possibility that it comes either from an inhabited but so far unknown world within the cluster, or from the main galaxy.'

'After so long?' exclaimed Lassiter.

'As I said, it is just a possibility,' Oban reminded him.

Kambril mused for a moment. 'Hopefully our security measures will ensure we are not discovered. If there is an encounter of some kind, we shall have to play it as it comes of course. Meanwhile we might turn it to our advantage. I propose we unofficially let news of this leak out, in a low-key way. It might make our workers more appreciative of the security the City offers. The threat of unknown aliens dropping in might also provide an excuse for a few shelter exercises. Keep people on their toes, eh? You might look into that, Captain.'

Captain Morven, head of City security, nodded and smiled.

'I'll see what we can do, Director.'

'Just in case this mystery craft shows itself around here, we'll increase the regular system patrols, Lieutenant,' Andez said to Oban. 'And upgrade the scanner watch.' Oban nodded.

Kambril beamed around the table. 'Any further items before we get down to regular business? No? Right, item one –

,

A light flashed urgently on the table intercom. Andez responded.

'Colonel,' came the voice from the control centre. 'We have detected a spacecraft escape pod which must have just dropped out of hyperspace. It's just drifting within our ten thousand kilometre perimeter now – and according to the instruments the pod is of an unknown design.'

3

Malf

livor Malf examined his costume critically in the three-Oway mirror, brushed out a crease and decided it would pass. No need for the full face and trimmings this time, he decided, but he had to give the cossi an airing. Mustn't let it mould to the hanger. He gave the cap a quick polish with his sleeve, placed it over his thinning ginger hair, and opened the door of his cabin.

He strode down the narrow corridor of the ship practising the walk and mannerisms. After a minute he had slipped into character so completely that his steps led him into the control compartment, where he began tapping gauges and peering intelligently at screens. Hevist and Selto, who had been laying up a course on the plotting table, looked at him in annoyance.

'Malf,' Hevist growled, 'stay in your cabin and stop walking around pretending you know what you're doing.'

'Do not mock a humble follower in the footsteps of Roscius, Mr Hevist,' Malf replied with dignity. 'Each to his own. I do not pass judgement on your pilotage of this noble vessel, nor cast aspersions on your competence so to do. No doubt it took long years of study at some venerable seat of academe to perfect the art, and constant application to maintain the high standards you doubtless achieved –'

'Malf, shut up!' said Selto.

'– Well, I too need constant practice to maintain mastery of my own modest art,' Malf continued relentlessly. 'A costume must look lived in to achieve the desired effect. Especially the shoes. Dedication, you see. That principle has always served me well, as certain perceptive commentators have been moved to point out in the past. Did I show you my cuttings –'

'Yes,' said Selto.

'Where it mentions the arduous study I put in towards my greatest success in –'

'Yes,' said Hevist.

‘But what about –’

‘Enough words – out!’ Selto ordered. ‘You’ve got an easy number here, but we can always put you back where we found you. There are plenty of no-hope vidplayers who would kill for your job.’

‘But hardly of my calibre. I, sir, was a star.’

‘Yeah, you told us. How many years ago was it? Before you took to the bottle, of course. Now who remembers you?

Look, why don’t you just have a drink off your ration. Just don’t try jiggering the dispenser again because I put a new lock on it.’

‘The suggestion is unworthy of you, Mr Selto,’ Malf replied with deeply offended dignity. ‘I admit a certain fondness for the fruits of the vine and field, be they fermented or distilled, but to imply –’

Selto rose from his chair menacingly. He was a head taller than Malf and twice his mass. Sensing he had lost the necessary rapport with his audience, Malf turned to go. As he did so a buzzer sounded from the control board and several lights flashed urgently. Hevist and Selto quickly turned back to the main panel and scanned the readings.

‘Dear me. Not a technical discommodation, I trust?’ asked Malf anxiously.

‘Proximity alarm,’ Selto muttered. ‘We’re detecting a hyperspace displacement bow wake. I thought I told you to go to your cabin.’

‘Can’t match the pattern to anything known,’ said Hevist, punching buttons rapidly. ‘It’s fast though: mark seventeen plus.’

‘Seventeen? What is it: a boosted courier ship?’

‘Maybe. We’ll know in a minute – it’s going to cross our course. Here it comes.’

Beyond the viewports the swirling pseudo colours of hyperspace writhed and twisted, overlaying the ghosts of stars from the real universe shining in negative light. Then a shadow loomed out of the distorted continuum. For a moment they saw it clearly. There was a fleeting impression of bulk yet grace, of flowing sculpted lines and gilded ornamentation, then it was gone.

Hevist and Selto were too surprised to speak. Malf did not let the

opportunity go to waste. He sniffed judgementally. ‘A trifle pretentious verging upon the gaudy, perhaps, but you have to admit it has a certain style.’

4

Stranger

t was almost a day and a half before Kambril called the Ispecialist scientists in. A rumour had already spread through the complex, via that peculiar osmosis by which such things propagate, that there had been some unusual activity in space, but facts were scarce. Then Cara Tarron, together with the heads of half a dozen technical departments, was summoned to an insulated test chamber where final weapons assemblies were examined for their electromagnetic characteristics.

Kambril was waiting for them.

‘Thirty-four standard hours ago, a spacecraft survival pod of unknown design was detected by our scanners drifting towards this planet. An interceptor was dispatched and the pod was successfully recovered and brought back to this facility.

The pod contained a single occupant who is still receiving medical treatment. Though human in outward appearance, examinations have revealed he is either a mutant or an alien of a race we have never encountered before. Your immediate concern, however, is with these items, which our regular technical staff have passed on for further study.’

The first was the survival pod itself, resting on a low cargo trolley in the middle of the chamber. It was an unmarked oblate spheroid, which could perhaps have carried a maximum of four people. A hatch was open on the upper curve of the hull, and Cara could see the glow of instrument lights from within.

‘Though apparently active none of the instruments appear to function, nor can any of the inscriptions on them be deciphered,’ Kambril explained. ‘A scan was made as a matter of course to check its internal circuitry, but the pod seems totally opaque to all the usual frequencies. An attempt was made to force some of the inspection panels, but it failed.

Whatever material the pod is made of it is clearly far tougher, weight for weight, than anything we know of.'

He crossed to a stand on which a silvery rod a little over a handspan long rested. It had raised bands set along its length and a transverse ring mounting on one end. Now this was found in the stranger's pocket, and may be some sort of tool or perhaps a weapon, as it definitely contains a power source.'

He moved over to a second stand bearing a broad copper bracelet with a scrolled device mounted on it. 'Possibly this is simply an ornament, or perhaps it serves some other function entirely, as it emits low level energy. Whatever it is it seems to have been important to our new guest. He was holding on to it so tightly that, even though he was unconscious, they had to pry his fingers open to make him release it.

'It is vital that we learn as much from these items as soon as possible. We may be in a first contact situation with a member of an advanced technical society, with all the potentialities that implies. For security reasons these items may not be removed from this room without authorization, therefore all equipment you wish to use during your examinations must be brought here. Meanwhile, Colonel Andez and I will see if the man is ready to be questioned.'

He walked out briskly followed by Scout, leaving Tarron and her colleagues to their new challenge.

Dr Emberley was a thin dry woman, very competent but with a rather remote precise manner. She gave Kambril and Andez her latest report outside the stranger's guarded room in the hospital.

'Nothing much has changed. The patient appears to be a human male of indeterminate middle years. We treated him for the effects of shock and explosive decompression, consistent with an emergency evacuation from a spacecraft. He speaks standard interlingua, but still can't give a clear account of himself due to his claimed amnesia.'

'Is this loss of memory genuine?' Andez asked.

'That is impossible to determine with the equipment I have available,' Emberley replied. 'However, temporary amnesia is not unknown after severe trauma, so I must suspend judgement. Usually memory returns after a few hours or days at the outside.' She frowned. 'Of course, he is not a usual case.

The gross physical anomalies I detected earlier have been confirmed.

He has two hearts with a combined pulse rate of about ten per minute. His normal body temperature seems to be approximately sixteen degrees. His blood chemistry, especially the haemoglobin structure, is quite abnormal. He has a large cranial cavity and encephalographic activity of a most unusual pattern and frequency. My original conjecture still stands: he is either an alien or a radically genetically modified human. We're still running tests. Maybe they'll tell us which.'

'Is he fit enough to be questioned?' Andez asked.

'Physically, yes: he seems to have made an uncommonly rapid recovery. But mentally...well, see for yourself' She eyed Scout, who had followed silently behind Kambril. 'But I'd advise you not to take that thing in there with you. Some people find them disturbing.'

Their first view of the stranger as they entered his room was the seat of a hospital gown protruding from beyond the corner of the bed. Despite their concern, Kambril and Andez exchanged amused smiles. Kambril cleared his throat loudly.

The hospital gown disappeared, there was a rapid shuffling sound and a thick mop of curly hair appeared in its place.

From within this brown halo a bemused but distinctive face, dominated by a beaky nose and intense pale protuberant eyes, surveyed them curiously. Then a broad mouth slowly spread into a toothy grin of welcome.

'Hello. I seem to have lost something. You haven't seen it, I suppose?'

'I'm not sure. What have you lost?' Andez replied cautiously.

The stranger scrambled to his feet and dusted off his hands and knees. 'Ah, now that's part of the problem – I can't remember. I might be like the man in the coal cellar looking for the black cat at midnight who isn't there. Of course, I haven't had much to do with coal cellars recently, or at least I don't think so, but they used to be very popular.' He blinked owlishly at them. 'I like cats. Perhaps that's what I'm looking for?'

'It's unlikely,' said Kambril.

'So that's not what I'm looking for?'

'I don't think so.'

‘Ah, so you know I don’t own a cat.’

‘Well, no, but –’

‘Then how do you know I haven’t lost one?’

‘Please, can we forget about cats and cellars –’

‘A torch!’

‘What?’

‘Why didn’t the man in the cellar use a torch to find the cat? That’s always bothered me.’

Kambril restrained himself with an effort. The stranger perched on the side of his bed staring at them with wide-eyed interest, while he and Andez sat in two rather hard visitor’s chairs. Kambril tried to regain the initiative. ‘I am Barris Kambril, Director of this facility, and this is Colonel Andez, our military liaison officer.’

‘Well, how do you do, very nice to meet you,’ said the stranger, springing up and shaking their hands heartily. ‘And I am…er…’ He frowned and sat down again heavily.

‘You’ve lost your memory,’ Andez prompted.

‘I have? Perhaps that’s what I was looking for? No, it was something else.’

‘Your name?’

‘More than that. Something missing – or somebody.’

‘Don’t worry about it for the moment. It will probably all come back to you shortly,’ Kambril reassured him. ‘Dr Emberley said –’

A sudden expression of delight crossed the man’s face.

‘That’s it. That sounds familiar.’

‘Your name sounds like Emberley?’

‘No, no.’

‘It is Emberley?’

‘No: Doctor. That’s right; I’m the Doctor.’

‘A doctor. Well, that’s a start. Now, Dr who?’

‘Who?’ The man tried the word out: ‘Who, who, who.

Possibly, possibly…’

‘Pardon?’

‘Dr Pardon? No, I’m pretty sure that’s not right. I can visualize the letters, you see, but I can’t remember how they sound. Different language. Should be able to speak it but can’t. Silly, isn’t it? Still everything comes to he who can’t wait.’

Kambril and Andez both sighed heavily. Humouring the stranger took more effort than they had expected. Kambril tried again. ‘Perhaps if you try to recall your profession it would help. You’re some kind of doctor, but of what discipline? Medicine, science, philosophy, literature…’

The man listened intently to the list, nodding happily.

Eventually Kambril ran down. The stranger looked hopefully at him. ‘Yes, they all sound quite familiar. That must be what I am.’

‘You can’t be a doctor of all of them!’ Andez said impatiently.

‘Oh, can’t I?’ The stranger looked glum and his lower lip pouted disconsolately. ‘Well, what ones would you suggest?’

‘Never mind,’ Kambril interjected quickly. “Doctor” will have to do for the moment. Do you remember how you got here?’

The Doctor frowned. ‘I remember darkness and spinning round. We were travelling somewhere –’

‘We? Who was with you?’ Andez said.

‘I can’t remember. There was a flash of light. Raw energy.

Separation and cold. I couldn’t breathe.’ He blinked. ‘And then I woke up here.’

‘I see,’ said Kambril thoughtfully. ‘Well, we found you drifting in space inside an escape pod and brought you down here.’

‘Oh, did you? That was very kind. Very kind indeed.’

Kambril found himself treated to the broad innocent smile again. The stranger seemed almost childishly grateful, but the eyes bothered him. Behind the sparkle they were disturbingly deep.

‘But you see,’ Andez said gently, ‘it suggests that either you had an accident with your craft, or else you were attacked.

Does this look familiar to you?’ He produced a folder of pictures of the mystery craft and showed them to the Doctor, who examined them with interest.

‘Ah, accelerated ion drive tubes and gyronic stabilizer coils.’

‘Then you do know this ship, Doctor?’ Andez asked eagerly.

‘No, is it yours?’

‘Doctor!’

‘But it is vaguely familiar. I think I’ve seen one like it somewhere, a long time ago...’ He trailed off vaguely.

‘Doctor, do you even know what part of the galaxy you’re in?’ Kambril asked, with barely concealed exasperation.

‘No.’

‘The Adelphine cluster? Does that sound familiar?’

‘No. Is it nice there?’

Before Kambril could answer his communicator beeped for attention. He held it to his ear for a minute, frowned, then said,

‘Yes, Academ Tarron, I understand. Well, you did your best.

We’ll be along shortly. Yes, and our guest.’ He glowered at the Doctor. ‘He seems to be quite well enough to get up now.’

Cara turned from the intercom to survey the chamber once more. The initial examination of the mystery items had proved an embarrassing failure, yet her feelings were mixed. The deductive challenge, so different from that of designing a new weapon system, had been enjoyable even if frustrating. There was an inherent pleasure in dealing with items from outside her carefully controlled world. Where

had the stranger's pod come from, for instance? Another world beyond their understanding, perhaps.

Unfortunately the pod controls had also proved beyond their understanding. Though lights flashed and buttons beeped softly when pressed, they could make no sense of their functions, which seemed to follow no logical pattern.

Hardened drill bits fused or shattered against its skin, and when they finally tried a portable laser to vaporize a sample a mirror force field briefly snapped on, after which the laser was abandoned and a technician left to have a minor burn on his arm tended. The copper bracelet had proved equally stubborn.

A high intensity portable scanner gave suspicious results, suggesting either it had an unheard of sub-atomic structure, or else the scanner was spectacularly malfunctioning. And then there was the hole in the wall insulation where the silver rod had been pointing when it had been inadvertently activated.

The shrill sound had also severely disrupted the coils of a test meter lying in its path, which was even now being dismantled by a technician. It was while their ears were still ringing that Tarron suggested calling the Director with the request that either he allowed the items to be taken to individual laboratories for examination under properly controlled conditions, or else they should seek the advice of the alien before they do any further damage. Her colleagues had agreed with surprising unanimity. Perhaps, brief as it had been, the challenge had provided a valuable lesson. Over the years they had become compartmentalized in their thinking, dealing only with Alliance or Union equipment. Yes, the Director had been correct: it was important to learn as much as possible about the alien's technology – and of course, Cara thought, about the alien himself.

In fact Prander arrived before their guest. He exchanged pleasantries with the expectant group of scientists as he crossed over to Cara's side.

'What are you doing here, Neels?' Cara asked.

'Catching a first glimpse of our visitor for the official record, of course, Aunty Cara,' he replied lightly, flourishing his sketch pad. 'They wouldn't let me in to see him at the med centre until they'd checked he wasn't carrying anything infectious, so this is the first chance I've had.'

The thought of contamination had not occurred to her. The known

worlds of the cluster had been free from that sort of problem for hundreds of years. ‘He wasn’t infectious, I suppose?’

‘No. Unusually free of microbes and bugs and so forth, so I heard. Ah, here they come.’ The door had opened to admit Kambril, Andez and the tall figure of the alien. Scout brought up the rear.

It was as though an untidy peacock had entered the room, Cara thought afterwards. Compared to their lab coats, Kambril’s conservative suit and Andez’s dark blue uniform, the stranger’s costume was a riot of unexpected line and colour. An outrageous soft broad-brimmed hat tilted back at a rakish angle, a long red jacket of a style she had only seen in history vids, a multicoloured scarf so long one end trailed on the floor and baggy trousers of a most curious texture. But dominating it all was his face. Though apparently quite human, it was a distinctive face, a new face which was alive with curiosity, eyes darting about to take in his surroundings.

How long was it since she had seen such a look? Taking in the group waiting for him he broke into a warm wide smile of delight and raised his hat in an odd gesture. Kambril opened his mouth to introduce him, but the stranger spoke first:

‘Hello, I’m the Doctor – ah!’ He pointed dramatically, jammed his hat back on his head, strode across the chamber and snatched up the silver rod device with evident relief ‘So there it is. I knew there was something missing.’

‘What is it?’ asked Farris, head of Structural Dynamics.

‘Why, a sonic screwdriver, of course,’ the Doctor replied, then blinked as though his words had surprised himself.

‘And what is its function, exactly?’

‘Oh, it can do lots of things,’ he said casually. He noticed the technician standing beside the broken meter. ‘Having a spot of bother? May I have a look?’

He bent over the open casing, long fingers deftly probing the internal mechanism. Then he adjusted the ‘sonic screwdriver’ and touched the emitter end to a coil. There was a rapid shrill sound. He adjusted the device again and it produced a deeper tone. He smiled in satisfaction, his hands seeming to blur as he reassembled the components, restored the connections and replaced the backplate. Four rapid whines and the locking screws had twisted themselves back into place.

He touched the test button and the display lit up.

‘There we are, as good as new. I’d say it had been exposed to a high intensity sonic field,’ he pronounced solemnly. ‘You must be more careful with that sort of thing in future.’ The speechless technician nodded and the Doctor beamed back benignly.

Kambril spoke up. ‘Thank you, Doctor, a most interesting demonstration. Perhaps you can be equally illuminating about this.’ He pointed to the escape pod.

The Doctor circled the tiny vessel cautiously, then bent down, took off his hat and peered inside. ‘Did I really get here in this?’ he asked, withdrawing his head.

‘You did.’

‘Can’t remember a thing about it. It doesn’t feel quite right.

And you say I was alone?’

‘Well, we could hardly miss anybody else in there, could we?’

‘No, I suppose not.’

In the thoughtful silence that followed Cara introduced herself, then asked, ‘Doctor, we can’t get the controls to function, but I wondered if they might not be somehow sensitized to your touch, or perhaps your race’s body pattern.’

His eyebrows lifted as though in surprise at the suggestion.

‘Now that is an interesting idea.’ He climbed into the cramped padded interior and pressed buttons experimentally. Nothing constructive appeared to happen. Lights continued to flash at random. He tried different combinations, his fingers moving faster. ‘Unless they’re badly damaged, and there’s no sign of it, these should logically be environmental detectors for the pod once it has been taken on board another ship or made a landfall somewhere.’ He stopped suddenly. ‘It’s no good.

There’s still something missing. Of course, perhaps they are not supposed to function logically.’

‘But that’s nonsense,’ Cara exclaimed.

‘Not if that’s the conclusion somebody wants you to come to. Then it

makes perfect sense,' he climbed out of the pod, the light of mischief dancing in his eyes, 'if the purpose is to make you do exactly what you are doing, which is to keep it under observation and tinker away at it.' He lowered his voice conspiratorially: 'Perhaps it's a diversion – or a bomb!'

There was an uneasy stir in the chamber. Andez said,

'Don't joke about such things.'

'Oh, I'm pretty sure I never joke about such things,' the Doctor assured him.

'Maybe we should get rid of it?' said Kambril.

'Unless that's what they want you to do,' the Doctor pointed out.

Andez began to look flustered. 'Who's "they"?'

'I don't know,' the Doctor admitted. 'But there usually is a

"they" somewhere, isn't there? If I knew who, I might know why.' Tarron sensed his mood darken perceptibly, and he scowled at them. 'And if I knew what I was doing where you found me I might be able to tell you. What do you do here, anyway? Where is here? And what's that contraption that's been following me about?' He pointed to Scout, who loomed impassively in the background, its photosensors glowing softly.

'That is Scout, my secretary and servant,' Kambril explained simply. 'A synthonic robot – surely you've seen robots before.'

'Oh yes, but not many like that.' The Doctor circled the gleaming heavily built machine, over a head taller than his own lofty figure. 'Rather more robust than strictly necessary to carry a tea tray or open the mail, I would say. Armour-plated joints, integral cannon and energy projectors. Wasted functions on a mere servant, unless it was simply convenient to use what was to hand.' He looked at them narrowly. 'Is that what you build here – robot war machines?' He tapped Scout on the chestplate. 'Is that what you are?'

Scout's vocalizer buzzed, 'This unit is not permitted to answer questions from unauthorized personnel.'

Kambril sighed. 'We'll explain as much as we can shortly, Doctor, then you'll understand, I promise. But there is one other item I'd like you to

examine first.' He indicated the copper bracelet.

The Doctor picked it up, turned it over in his hands and frowned. 'We were holding on to it, my two friends and myself, spinning around in the darkness.' His eyes hollowed despairingly. 'If only I could remember their names.'

Cara experienced her usual irrational sense of unease as she took her place at the long polished conference-room table, with the full council opposite her. Only Brant smiled across at her reassuringly. Yet there was nothing overtly sinister about the room itself. In fact it was light and airy, with large slanting windows cut into the living rock out of which the complex had been tunnelled, giving a spectacular view over the Valley.

Through an armour-glass door she could see the operators in the adjoining secure files room working diligently at their consoles. Perhaps, she concluded, it was the thick carpet which muted their speech that gave it such an unsettling atmosphere of reverential concentration and grave moment.

The Doctor, however, continued to deport himself with supreme indifference to surroundings. An apparently mercurial temperament had converted him within an hour from taking a keen interest in his surroundings to sullen introspection and impatience – possibly with himself and his unreliable memory. Now he sat with his chair tilted impudently backwards and his heels resting on a table jotter pad, flicking the end of his ridiculous scarf like a cat twitching its tail. 'You want something from me,' he said to Kambril.

The Director was a little taken aback by this directness, but managed a thin smile. 'Only your understanding and cooperation, Doctor.' The Doctor raised quizzical eyebrows.

Kambril continued. 'As you have already deduced, this complex is engaged in the manufacture of weapons. From hand-held units all the way through to heavy mobile weapons and self-programming synthonic humaniforms like Scout.'

'I don't approve,' the Doctor said bluntly. 'Especially of such autonomous devices.' He frowned. 'I think somewhere recently I've seen too much of what misery such weapons can bring.'

'That is fair enough,' Kambril allowed. 'A fine principle.

But what is the alternative when faced with the actuality of war? Do

you think we should simply lie down in the face of an implacably hostile enemy? Sometimes conflict is inevitable and there comes a time when you have to fight or die. I know of no race who would simply choose the latter.'

'You can try to make peace.'

'When all such efforts are interpreted as weakness and appeasement by your enemy, and only gives them the confidence to redouble their own war-making? Believe me, Doctor, that approach was tried many years ago – and failed utterly. You are from, well, somewhere outside the cluster.

You do not know the ways of the Averon Union.'

The Doctor swung his feet to the ground and leant forward intently. 'Enlighten me.'

'Well, about fifteen hundred years ago, a party of human settlers discovered the Adelphine cluster out here on the galactic rim. It's hidden from the rest of the galaxy by thick interstellar dust clouds, and so has remained pretty isolated.

Humans terraformed and settled Landor, and in time began to spread and establish various outposts and colonies. Such contact as we had with the indigenous alien races of the cluster were peaceful – with the exception of Averon. The Averonians were the most powerful race in the cluster until we came here, and putting it simply, they believe in their innate superiority over all other sentient life forms. There were various small incidents over the years, but mostly both sides ignored each other. However, about thirty years ago the disputes grew more serious: uninhabited worlds claimed by both sides for development, acts of piracy on the trade routes, suspicions of spying and industrial sabotage, that sort of thing. Very soon, with the exception of a few neutrals, the cluster divided between the so-called Union worlds that Averon controlled, and the Alliance, led by Landor. Twenty-six years ago the war started in earnest, spreading from world to world until most of the cluster was involved.'

Cara felt the old ache begin to grow within her as Kambril spoke. Memories of that last parting. The eternal loss.

'After a couple of years it became apparent that Landor would have to move its most advanced weapons research and development facilities outside the system, where they would be safe from Averon raider ships. Their spacecraft technology always was advanced. We just

about manage to keep up with them and neutralize their fleets' actions.' Kambril scowled darkly. 'Most of the time, anyway. So this facility was set up out here on –' he paused '– well, let's just say somewhere remote. You will understand the location of Deepcity is the most closely guarded secret in the Alliance.'

'Which is a polite way of saying, most regretfully, that I can never leave here, I suppose?' said the Doctor.

'Not at all,' Kambril replied calmly. 'If you can give us the coordinates of your homeworld and we can transport you there without prejudicing our security, we will do so. You have my word on it. But we hope you may choose to stay here voluntarily for a while. Well, we'll come to that in a moment.

So anyway; Deepcity was staffed by the best technicians and designers we had. Automated assembly and production facilities were incorporated, allowing it to be run by a relatively small workforce, and everything was arranged to make it as self-sufficient as possible. As the war caused other worlds to lose their ability to manufacture advanced weapons, Deepcity rapidly became the main supplier to the Alliance.

The Union copied many of our best designs of course, but we kept coming up with improvements. Slowly we were turning the tide, pushing the Union back to its home bases. And then, nineteen years ago...' He looked at Cara. 'It's painful, but perhaps Academ Tarron can tell it best, Doctor. I was stationed at another outpost at the time. I only took over here when my predecessor... Well, you explain, Cara.'

She looked into the Doctor's pale eyes. They were strange and very deep, but she saw compassion there. She did so want him to understand. 'It wasn't easy when we first came here to work on weapons systems. Hardly any of us had done military work before, and most would not have touched it in any other circumstances. But we knew it was necessary to defend ourselves and our families back on Landor. Possibly we did not work hard enough then. We'll never make that mistake again...'

She swallowed and forced herself to go on. 'Nineteen years ago Averon assembled a vast fleet and attacked Landor. Up until then they had only used devices of mass destruction in open space, because they wanted to preserve planets more or less intact for conquest. But they knew if they could totally destroy the head of the Alliance the rest would crumble, so they used maximum force. Chemicals, atomics,

filthy poisonous things...' She wiped hot tears from her eyes and saw Brant looking at her with an intense expression of sympathetic pain. The faces of the others were stony and set. 'It was terrible waiting for news. We had a message the attack was starting, then all communications went down. We were out of touch for weeks. There was nothing to do but work and hope.

Then the news came through...' She swallowed again. 'Landor was dead. Sterilized. A billion and a half people and a green and growing world gone!'

She drew out the carefully preserved stereoprint from its folder in her pocket and showed the Doctor. It was a simple snapshot showing three figures, two men and a woman holding glasses and posing beside the plaque of a new office, with their names and a line of description beneath. The female figure was recognizable as a younger version of herself. One of the men with her, a few years older, showed a distinct family resemblance.

'My brother Brin, and my husband Mattew. Mattew was killed in the early years of the war. Brin was on Landor when the Union attacked. I just hope he died quickly.' She replaced the picture in its folder and took a sip of water from the beaker before her with a trembling hand. 'Some people here, like our first Director, had mental breakdowns on hearing the news. I came close myself. Then Director Kambril and his team came and rallied us wonderfully. He gave us a purpose. We could still fight on. You see, Averon had gone too far. Our fleet pushed them back to their home system, even though they lost almost every ship they had. They hurt the Averonians so badly they had to spend years rebuilding their defences and they never left their system in such force again. And in that time we re-armed and began to recover our losses. Since then neither Averon or any member of the Union has used mass destruction or indiscriminate weapons on planets with biospheres again. I think they're frightened that we might be pushed into doing the same to them. It's horribly tempting but we wouldn't do that to any other world, except perhaps Averon. We often say we want them dead – I suppose it's become a sort of ritual.

Anyway, here we don't make chemical, biological or nuclear devices, just precision weapons. I know they kill, but at least they do it as quickly and cleanly as possible. We do have principles, you see. We're better than the Union and we want to hold on to some standards of decency. I know the concept of humane warfare may seem a contradiction in terms, but at least we try. We few native Landorans who are left scattered about the cluster keep the struggle going,

supporting our allies as best we can. We just want an end to the war, however long it takes. Now do you understand?'

The Doctor suddenly got up and paced round the room looking angry. Cara was not surprised. She felt the same; almost like the remembrance session when they finished the primary work on MICA. She wanted to shout but felt too drained by her explanations, so she let it simmer coldly within her instead. The Doctor stopped outside the entrance to the secure data room, shaded his eyes and peered intently through the tinted panels. The three operators on duty looked up from their consoles in surprise. He waved at them irreverently, and then continued on his circuit of the chamber again, scuffing his feet, head bent, apparently unaware of the curious eyes that followed him. Eventually he slumped back into his own seat once more. 'All right. You've got my understanding and even my sympathy. Now what about this cooperation you mentioned?'

Kambril rested his arms on the table, steepled his fingertips, and spoke carefully. 'Very simply, I am asking you to work with us, even if only briefly. It is obvious from your escape capsule that your race is in advance of us in certain technical matters, Doctor, and you yourself have already shown a remarkable talent for such things. Will you share some of that knowledge with us? Not out of gratitude for rescuing you – we expect no payment for that. Do it because of the loathing you yourself expressed for war. Help us to end this conflict quickly by improving our weapons. Synthonic devices are used to spearhead and augment conventional forces. If Landor can only contribute a handful of people to the struggle, at least help us send our best machines. Now, Academ Tarron has offered to let you work in her laboratory while your memory returns. There is a new device we call MICA being tested, for instance. We believe it could be an important breakthrough, but there are inevitably teething troubles. You might find the problems stimulating. Then of course you may have a personal reason for joining with us on such work: those friends you half remember. I sincerely hope they are alive and well, and we are keeping watch for other pods. But you must face the likelihood that they were lost with your mother ship. Now, there are only two possible reasons for your presence in an escape capsule: an accident with your ship, or a deliberate attack by another craft. We have been making enquiries and I can assure you no Alliance vessel has fired on any unidentified ship in this region. Perhaps this mysterious "golden" ship we've already spotted was responsible, though it's taken no hostile action that we are aware of. But it is far more likely it was an Averonian craft. Help us and you may be avenging your friends. Well, Doctor, what do you say?'

As the Doctor pursed his lips in thought, Cara felt the anger rise within her again, and she saw it mirrored in his face.

Sympathetic reaction, she thought: fellow beings sharing a sense of loss. The Doctor's fists slowly clenched so that his knuckles showed white. 'Yes,' he said coldly, 'I will help you.

For the cause of peace and for my friends.' He suddenly clutched his head as though in pain.

Kambril looked at him in alarm, half rising from his chair.

'Doctor – what's the matter? Are you ill?'

'Sarah and Harry,' the Doctor said wonderingly. 'How could I have forgotten their names?'

5

War Zone

arry Sullivan RN had been staring dreamily up through Hthe interlaced branches above his head for several minutes before his addled thoughts gathered themselves sufficiently to form a most pertinent question: where was he?

Why was he lying on the grass staring up at branches that, he now realized, sprouted curious five-sided leaves. He sat up cautiously, automatically brushing off his grey slacks and dark blue blazer. His muscles protested as though he had been still for a long time. He rubbed his chin and found a day's growth of bristles.

The grass he had been lying on was not actually grass, he now noticed, but more of a feathery bluish-tinged moss peppered with tiny red and yellow flowers. He was in some sort of wood. The tree trunks were marked with a diamond pattern in their bark, which caught oddly the sunlight that filtered between them. Come to that, the light had a peculiar tint to it as well.

Let's face it, Sullivan: this isn't jolly old England.

A sequence of events began unevenly to reassemble itself, and the name Skaro surfaced in his mind, followed by a host of unpleasant

images. He hoped a Dalek wasn't suddenly going to appear because he really wasn't feeling up to tackling one at that moment. No, it was too green for Skaro. Besides, they'd left there...

The Doctor and Sarah – where were they?

He scrambled to his feet looking around anxiously for his companions, but he was quite alone. What was the last thing he recollected? It was an effort to remember, and he began to suspect he'd had some sort of injury. He cautiously felt his head, but there didn't seem to be any sign of damage. Slowly it came back to him. They'd been using the Time Ring, which the Doctor's people, the Time Lords, had given them as a means of getting back to the TARDIS after completing their mission on Skaro. And then...? Nothing. Hoping his memory would clear further with a bit of fresh air, he got to his feet and started walking. Every few minutes he called out for the Doctor and Sarah, just in case they had landed close by. Birdlike things hopped about the branches over his head twittering in alarm, but otherwise his efforts brought forth no response.

Gradually the ground sloped downwards and the wood thinned. Rolling countryside patterned with cultivated fields opened out before him, while nestling in a valley below was a small town. The buildings were of various sizes but all, as far as he could tell, were either oval or circular in plan. Some were single-storeyed with domed roofs, others stacked like tiered cakes, the upper levels decreasing in size, up to four storeys high. Sunlight sparkled off windows in their curving sides. The tracks of at least four roads meandered along the valley into the town, with a scattering of smaller dwellings strung out alongside them.

Harry studied the scene for several minutes. He could see no sign of life, nor any vehicles moving along the roads. Was this normal for wherever it was in the middle of the day?

Perhaps the people of this world were nocturnal and were currently tucked up in whatever it was they used for beds?

This was the sort of thing the Doctor would have, presumably, known about. Where had he and Sarah got to? Perhaps, if they arrived somewhere close by, they would also make for the town. Well, it was a logical place to start looking anyway.

Harry set off down the hill, keeping close to the hedges formed from what seemed to be interlaced coils of a purple vine, trying to move

unobtrusively without appearing furtive, just in case someone, or something, was observing his progress. He skirted fields of crops, mostly of alien forms and colours, but a few of which he would not have given a second glance at if he'd passed them along some English country lane. There were a few clicks and twitters from amongst the plants, presumably indicating that the local relatives of insects were at work, and the occasional small glittering form whizzed past his ear. But, except for a few distant flights of birds, he saw no other living thing. A feeling of unease began to creep over him. Alien world or not, this was too quiet.

Five minutes later he reached a tall vine hedge with a natural arched opening in it. On the other side ran a narrow lane, neatly tiled with hexagonal slabs of stone and fronted by a row of single-storeyed houses. Here he stopped, his brow furrowing in dismay, as he now discovered something that had not been visible from the hillside.

Several of the circular porthole-like windows facing him were shattered, and one was streaked about with blackened soot. Part of a wall had been blown inwards, and others were pockmarked by straggling lines of bullet holes. He strained his ears, but the deathly silence persisted. Cautiously he moved on along the winding lane as it headed towards the centre of the town. A few buildings had completely collapsed and piles of rubble from fallen walls spilled into the streets, themselves scarred by shell craters.

He reached what must have been the central square which was as deserted as the rest of the town. A paved road linking the other radial ways circled an open stretch of the mossy grass, now gouged by track marks and craters. A smudge of colour on the other side of the square caught his eye and he crossed over. It was a sort of canopied public notice board.

Pinned up on it were several notices combining brightly coloured images with blocks of bold type. One was a list of blackout times posted by the local civil defence force for Tesh'gar, presumably the town he was presently standing in.

Another poster presented a familiar image.

YOUR WORLD NEEDS YOU!

Below was a picture of an alien in military dress. It looked rather like a deer or goat would if it had developed intelligence and taken to walking on its hind legs a few million years before. Its face was long

and half covered in golden hair, with small horns protruding from its skull above long pointed ears.

Its body was slender, with some indication of a tail, thin short legs with backward-bending knees, and broad feet which, despite being encased in oddly cut boots, suggested triple-clefted hooves. Its hands were six-fingered and heavily nailed.

Harry could see them clearly because the soldier was portrayed clutching some sort of firearm at the ready. Even across the boundaries of species Harry could sense the glow of patriotic pride the image was clearly designed to radiate.

For all the efforts of the locals, however, it appeared the battle had already been lost for Tesh'gar, or else its inhabitants would have returned. Possibly it was now in some no man's land behind enemy lines, temporarily unoccupied because it had no strategic value. But how soon before they showed up –

whoever they were – and what was their attitude towards non-combatants?

Even as he brooded he realized the sun was already low over the horizon and sinking behind hazy clouds. What should he do? First, find some shelter for the night. He didn't like the thought of breaking into a private dwelling, but there ought to be a public building he could use. It took him ten minutes to discover a three-storey structure just off the square. A shell had punched a hole through one lower wall, but the rest seemed relatively undamaged.

He stepped inside. A couple of large halls or community rooms occupied the lower levels, but the top floor was divided into several small cubicles, furnished with surprisingly ordinary if spartan beds and bedding, rather like a youth hostel. Perhaps this was the local version of a YMCA? There was also a communal washroom with all the usual, if oddly styled, fixtures and fittings. A colourless fluid ran sluggishly out of the taps which, after cautious experimentation, he decided was plain water. That was one essential taken care of.

Pity there was no food available, but he could manage without it for one night. Tomorrow he might search for some, or try the fields to see if there was anything amongst the crops he could eat.

Harry chose a cubical, bolted the door and lay down on the bed, still fully dressed, watching the daylight bleed from the sky. He didn't want to risk a light, even if the power was still on. He yawned,

realizing how tired he felt. Well, there hadn't been a chance to recover from the hectic time on Skaro yet. He hoped the Doctor and Sarah were somewhere safe. Work out some sort of search strategy for them in the morning. What had the Doctor got them into this time? Strange thing about time travelling...no time to...

Harry slept.

He was woken in the thin grey light of dawn by the rumble of distant thunder.

No, not thunder.

He flung off his blanket and crossed to the window, just in time to glimpse slender fast-moving silver deltaforms disappearing over the horizon. Smoke rose over the forested brow of a hill. There came the distant sound of more explosions, getting closer. Across the open fields he saw the lumbering shapes of armoured vehicles with oddly shaped turrets emerge from the pre-dawn mist. Between them were the forms of what looked like men in armour. Suddenly orange and yellow fireballs mushroomed around the tanks, and one vehicle slewed to a halt belching oily black smoke. He twisted about to see the insect-like form of some stork-legged machine drop back into the cover of a copse of trees. The zip and rattle of small-arms fire began to grow louder. The war was returning to Tesh'gar.

Time to leave, Sullivan, he told himself, flinging open the door of his room and sprinting for the stairs. His foot was actually poised over the first step when he heard vehicles screeching to a halt in the street outside. There followed the clatter of boots and rather sonorously pitched voices snapping out commands. Doors banged open. Silently he padded back to his room. There was a tiny built-in cupboard beside the door that was concealed when the room door was open. He squeezed into it, pulled the room door after him, and slid the cupboard door almost closed.

He heard a growing commotion from the halls below and more boots clattered on the stairs as lookouts were posted to the top floor. He tensed as they clattered past his door, but no one came in. Long minutes passed but he remained undiscovered. The sounds of war rose and fell about the town.

The acrid tang of explosives and the throat-catching stench of burning plastic and scorched metal began to pervade the air.

Occasional small-arms fire hit the building and he heard glass

breaking. By pressing his ear to the inside wall of his cramped hiding-place, Harry could just hear the occupants of the halls below. Apparently a temporary command post and first-aid station had been set up within them, for there were urgent conferences and orders being dispatched, intermingled with calls for medicines, litter bearers and occasional moans of pain. These last sounds made him feel both sickened and frustrated. They might be aliens down there, but they were also soldiers in pain, and it was his calling to alleviate suffering in such circumstances. He gnawed at his knuckle anxiously. Should he risk revealing himself? The middle of a battle was not the best of times to spring surprises on soldiers.

Come to that, just how would he explain his presence? And who was occupying the building anyway: the locals or the invaders?

An explosion sounded near by and the building rocked. A second went off even closer and glass shattered. Here it comes, Harry thought, even as a flash of light shone around the cupboard door frame and a deafening blast shook the building to its foundations. The concussion jerked his head back to crack against the wall even as it blew out the windows of his room. Masonry and timbers ground and thudded to rest amid the patter of lesser debris. There was a moment's stunned silence, then the first shouts and cries from below.

Ears ringing, he kicked aside the flimsy cupboard door and staggered to his feet. The room door had been torn off its hinges. Rubble littered the hall floor outside, and, half buried beneath it, was the form of a soldier who might have stepped right out of the recruiting poster in the square.

Professional instinct took over and Harry bent over the alien and began hauling away the debris. There was a blood-soaked gash in the trouser over the soldier's left upper leg.

Harry pulled out his penknife and cut the fabric away. Bright arterial blood pulsed on to the floor from a deep wound in the smoothly furred flesh. He hacked a length from the alien's webbing harness and looped it about the leg above the injury.

He scrabbled about in the debris with one hand until he found a short length of broken metal channel, pushed it through the loop and twisted it tight. The flow of blood slackened to a gentle oozing as the improvised tourniquet took effect. The alien stirred and his head lifted. Shocked and pain-filled eyes looked at him over a long muzzle.

‘It’s all right, old chap,’ he said reassuringly. ‘I’m a doctor.

Any bones broken, do you think – can you move?’

The bewildered soldier shook his head slowly.

‘Right. I’ll give you a hand and we’ll get you some proper treatment. Hold this tight.’ He placed the alien’s left hand over the bar of the tourniquet and helped him upright. Pulling his free arm across his shoulders he supported him as they made their way down the stairs. The main hall was a mess, strewn with rubble and bodies and a dozen dazed soldiers trying to salvage both comrades and equipment. Such was the confusion that it was actually several seconds before they registered the stranger in their midst. ‘No time to explain,’

Harry snapped crisply in his best authoritative tone. ‘Where are your medics?’

One of the soldiers, jaw still hanging open, mutely pointed to a couple of still and bloody forms in the corner. Damn, thought Harry, this is going to be awkward. He took a deep breath. ‘Who’s in charge?’

Heads turned about in rapid assessment and one spoke up:

‘I suppose I am…Who are –’

He wished he could interpret their insignia. ‘Name and rank?’

The soldier stiffened. ‘Arken’rek, pentdekander Fourth Company.’

Pentdekander, Harry knew, though he would never understand exactly how he knew, meant ‘leader of fifty men’, but unlike the rest of the alien’s speech it did not readily translate into a less cumbersome or familiar phrase. What was the nearest equivalent: a corporal? Oh, for a hardbitten sergeant or better yet a CPO. ‘Can you call up for replacement medical assistance?’ He sensed their confusion and knew order had to be restored quickly.

‘Out with the other section…and the communicator’s smashed…Who are you?’

‘Surgeon Lieutenant Harry Sullivan,’ he said grandly, making it sound only one step removed from God and omitting to mention in which service. ‘If you will salvage what you can of your medical supplies and clear a space I will endeavour to treat your wounded. Then you’d better send some men upstairs to see who else needs help. Well, jump

to it, man!'

Arken'rek jumped.

A space was cleared, a table set up and the dead medic's kit recovered. Wounded began to arrive from outside. The battle continued around the town, but for the moment they were spared further missiles as murderously accurate as the last salvo. Harry was dimly aware of startled looks and whispers cast in his direction, but he paid them no attention. He had a job to do. Although working in makeshift conditions with unfamiliar equipment and medicines on patients with an alien physiology, he was going to attempt to save lives. Normally he would never have contemplated such a risky undertaking but this was an emergency. Fortunately the medicines were marked out for quick and easy use and unit doses were specified. 'Medicine by numbers' he remembered saying to Sarah while using the advanced medical kit on the Nerva space station, and the recollection helped straighten the principles out in his mind. Some of the labelling he only half understood, but *intramuscular* and *intravenous* translated easily enough in his mind, as did *anaesthetic* and *antiseptic*: all fundamental concepts apparently. Bandages were bandages, and a staple suture gun was recognizable, even if the grip was designed for a hand with an extra finger. A wound was a wound and this was strictly emergency surgery.

Keep the patients alive long enough to ship them back behind the lines for more specialized care.

He took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves and set to work.

The interminable bloody day drew to an end.

Harry had worked almost without a break for fifteen hours.

And then the stream of casualties tailed off and the sounds of battle faded. He looked around stupidly, numbed by his labours, even as soldiers helped him to a chair. A drink and a ration bar were put into his hands. Some indefinite time later he became aware of an older soldier, with a grey muzzle and grander insignia on his uniform, sitting on another chair facing him. Arken'rek introduced him as 'Dekkilander Chell'lak'.

Leader of ten thousand men, Harry thought dully: a general?

He should probably salute but did not have the strength.

‘I understand many men are alive today who would otherwise be dead,’ Chell’lak said simply. ‘On their behalf I thank you.’

‘Just doing my duty, sir.’

‘You did it well. We did not know any of our human allies were on this part of Jand. Did you come from the squadron that intercepted the escort of the Nethrass fleet? Some ships were sadly lost, I understand.’

‘In all honesty, sir, I’m not sure how I got here. I may have had a bit of a bump on the head recently. Not too clear about some things. Uh…but I do remember looking for a couple of friends of mine, though. Has there been any news of other, er, strange arrivals?’

‘Not that I am aware of, but I will have enquiries made.

Though you realize in the circumstances…’

‘Of course, sir. Duty first. How’s the battle going?’

‘We’ve pushed the Nethrass back almost to their beachheads in places,’ Chell’lak said with satisfaction.

‘Tomorrow we’re going to…but I had better let you get some rest. We’ll talk further in the morning.’ He made to rise, then hesitated. ‘May I ask: do you come from an outpost, or were you from Landor?’

The question was loaded in some way Harry could not fathom. Was it safe to reveal he was a complete outsider? He tossed a mental coin before replying carefully, ‘I can honestly say I’m not from an outpost.’

As far as he could judge native Jand features, Chell’lak looked at him with a strange mixture of respect, yet also incomprehension. ‘I understand you treated a few Nethrass prisoners today.’

Harry nodded, dimly recalling a couple of beings like man-sized hairless weasels with six legs in the tattered remains of uniforms. Not knowing who they were and unwilling to reveal his ignorance, he had simply dealt with them along with the others as best he could.

‘I marvel at your tolerance,’ said Chell’lak. ‘After what the Union did to Landor.’

‘Quite,’ said Harry, not understanding at all. ‘Well, caring for the sick without favour is still my duty – even after Landor.’

He would have to learn some local history as soon as possible – before the Jand learnt the truth about him.

6

Work or Die!

arah regained consciousness gradually, feeling sick and Svery confused. The pins and needles of returning sensation were playing about her body. Irritably she tried to rub the life back into her limbs, but something held her back. Why couldn't she move, she wondered vaguely. It was some moments before she became aware of the residual ache in her arms and the tight bands around her outstretched wrists and ankles which were holding her forcibly upright. Then recollection dawned like a douche of cold water, and with a fearful gasp she blinked her eyes open.

She was fastened to a vertical frame in a chamber that was quite dark except for a large flat screen. On the screen the image of an alien sat patiently observing her.

It was a humanoid reptilian with greenish-blue finely scaled skin, iridescent where the light glanced off it. Large vertically slitted intelligent eyes, presently regarding her with apparent distaste, protruded from the top of its head, which was also crowned with a ridge of small bony plates. Below this was a small snout with narrow nostrils and a broad frog-like mouth.

Its ears were curious furled tubes, held erect and open towards her. A loose wattle of flesh hung below its chin, while slits around the top of its neck might have been gills. About its narrow, sloping shoulders was a loose silvery tunic of vaguely Grecian appearance. Webbed and clawed hands were folded neatly across its lap as it reclined in a high-backed and ornately decorated chair.

Apparently satisfied she was now fully conscious it said,

'Are there any more survivors skulking up in the wilderness, human?'

Its speech had a throaty sibilance to it, but Sarah understood the words well enough. Swallowing her fear she tried to reply calmly but was aware of the tremor in her voice.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. Who are you? Why are you keeping me like this?’ She tugged futilely against the straps that held her.

The alien blinked slowly, as though surprised. It leant a little closer to the screen. ‘Do you not know who I am?’

Sarah shook her head vigorously. ‘No. Should I?’

‘I am Baal Garikth-tal.’ As Sarah continued to look uncomprehendingly at him he added, ‘You are on the prime moon of Averon. Are you not afraid? Do you not hate and fear me?’

Striving to keep the catch in her voice under control, she answered the strange question. ‘Why should I? I’ve never heard of Averon, and I’ve never seen you or anyone like you before.’

Baal appeared momentarily indecisive, then flicked an impatient claw. ‘How did you survive so long in the wilderness?’

‘I’m not sure. Really, I don’t remember properly.’

‘What do you remember?’

She remembered walking: laboured breathing and the tightness in her chest, her parched and dry throat, eyes that felt sandpapered from within, her scratched hands and the bloody gash in her right knee, which stabbed every time she put too much weight on that leg. The terrain did not help. Beds of treacherous loose rocks that turned under her feet alternated with drifts of soft powdery sand which she waded through heavily. But she struggled determinedly on. Another wave of dizziness caught her and she fell forward with unnatural slowness on to her hands and knees again, wincing as she reopened her wound. With an effort she rose and continued on her way. Step, step, step: one foot in front of the other. Where was she going? She must have had some goal when she started, but now it had been lost somewhere in her muddled thoughts. She plodded on, trawling her unreliable memory.

She recalled a war, huge domes, and misshapen people.

Sinister conical shapes and harsh grating voices; a dash through tunnels and a final explosion – and then?

She halted, swaying dangerously. Amidst the dark rocks ahead of her was a glitter that seemed familiar and somehow very important. She

took another couple of hesitant steps and squinted through reddened eyes. Water? A shallow pool, green-scummed at the edges, nestled in a hollow within a curving arm of jagged rocks. She staggered forward and dropped on to her knees in the damp sand by its edge, cupped her hands together and drank. The finest wine could not have tasted sweeter.

After several mouthfuls she began to splash some over her face. Gradually her head began to clear and life flowed back into her aching limbs. Sitting back she inspected the cut on her knee, then carefully washed that as well. As she did so she took conscious note of her clothing for the first time. Her trousers were patterned in patches of dull yellow, green and brown, while over a tan T-shirt she wore a lightweight bottle-green jerkin of military pattern. They were distinctive, but she couldn't remember where she'd acquired them.

Then she realized she couldn't even remember her own name.

She stared about bleakly, hoping for inspiration. How could you forget your own name? Trying not to panic yet feeling faintly ridiculous at the same time, she searched her clothes for a name tag, but there was none. In fact her costume did not seem that familiar. Dirty and torn where she had fallen, but otherwise quite new. Or at least new to her. Where did it come from? Think, think!

Skaro.

Her name? No: a place. A planet. Yes, she had acquired these clothes on Skaro, during the war between the Thals and the Kaleds. And her name was...Sarah. Sarah Jane Smith, and she was a journalist. She gasped with relief and shouted her name aloud several times just for the pleasure of hearing it, until her voice cracked and she broke into a fit of dry coughing. She drank some more, sat back against a rock and tried to think soberly, as the key of her name unlocked the past.

UNIT, Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart, the Doctor, Harry Sullivan, the TARDIS, that was it. The Doctor, Harry and herself had all been holding on to the Time Ring. It had been transporting them, via some interdimensional shortcut through time and space, away from Skaro and back to the TARDIS.

But a sudden mistiness had enveloped them accompanied by a flash of intense light, as though they had flown through a thunder-cloud. The Ring tingled and became a ghost in her hand. She saw the others tumbling away from her, clasping at emptiness and calling out

soundlessly. She fell on alone into darkness. Then she was in this wilderness. But where were the Doctor and Harry?

Sarah took another draught of water, climbed slowly to her feet, and made her way cautiously up the side of a long sloping face of rock, panting in the thin air. She seemed unnaturally light on her feet, which suggested a smaller world than Earth. However, the thin air sapped her strength in equal measure, giving her little more agility. She scrambled on until she had an uninterrupted view.

A harsh sun cast equally harsh shadows over a wilderness of pits and gullies and jagged rocks, some wind-carved into strange sculptural shapes, that stretched away to an oddly shrunken horizon. Fans of dust formed miniature dunes and trailed in the lee of larger boulders or pooled in the scattering of shallow craters that stippled the landscape. A few straggling and desiccated plants were the only signs of life. She shielded her eyes and studied the sky. It was a deep blue shading to purple, with a faint scattering of stars. Within it, about halfway to the zenith, hung the globe of a planet close to full phase. It was about five times as wide as the Moon appeared from Earth, and reflected the light brilliantly from an apparently unbroken layer of cloud that concealed its surface. What was beneath it: another wilderness or a world teeming with life?

She cautioned herself against pointless speculation and continued her sweep. The last quarter was more rewarding. It was hard to judge distances in the thin clear air and the close horizon, but about a mile off the ground seemed to fall away sharply, as though a long slice had been cut from the edge of the world. What lay beyond?

Even as she pondered the risk in leaving her precious water hole to explore, she realized that a twinkling light had emerged from the glare of the sun and was rapidly descending in a long arc. Sarah narrowed her eyes and could just make out a silvery globe with splayed spidery legs. She followed it down until it vanished beyond the sharply curtailed rocky horizon. After a few moments there came from out of the sky a long drawn rumble of displaced air, which gradually faded into silence.

A spacecraft had just landed.

Taking careful note of the rocks about the water-hole so that she would recognize them again, she set off.

It took her almost an hour to wend her way across the rugged ground

to the spot where the craft had disappeared from view. But finally she entered a twisting gully that opened out on to clear sky. Getting down on her hands and knees she crawled cautiously forward to its lip and peered over.

Her vantage point was at the top of a steep escarpment of bare rock, its base softened by numerous conical heaps of scree formed by the gradual accumulation of loose material from the upland. Five or six hundred feet below, a level plain stretched away to the distinctly curved horizon, broken only by a few distant upthrust rocky mesas. It resembled the landscape from a western film, except that this plain was floored by an ancient wrinkled lava flow, stippled in places with small craters and occasional patterns of interlaced cracks like those in dried mud. Clearly it made an excellent landing field, for not only the craft she had seen arriving earlier, but two others of more slender design were standing a couple of miles out from the base of the cliff. Closer to the cliff was a cluster of buildings. There was a tall latticework mast with some oddly shaped antennae mounted on it, surrounded by several domes of varying sizes, and five large low flat-roofed buildings with many roof lights. The structures were separated from one another by a network of tall wire fences, linking up with a perimeter fence that surrounded the entire complex.

Pin-like forms of people, or at least humanoids, were moving between the buildings, and a couple of vehicles could be seen travelling out across the flats towards the landing field.

For perhaps ten minutes she observed the activity, wondering if she should make contact with whoever operated the base and, if so, how she would manage it. The climb down would be a somewhat hazardous undertaking. Perhaps it would be simpler if she just stood up and waved and shouted.

In the event the decision was made for her.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed a small craft flying level with the summit along the line of the escarpment. It was heading towards her, making a slight humming sound. As it drew closer she saw it was a flat disc ringed by a guard rail and manned by two large, oddly proportioned figures. Struck by sudden doubt she eased herself back from the gully mouth, scrambled to her feet and retreated into the cover of the rocks.

Perhaps she had better watch a little longer before making contact, just to be on the safe side. The distant hum of the flying disc faded

away unexpectedly. She strained her ears.

Had it turned back to the base? Suddenly the hum returned, swelling to a loud purring drone and the disc skimmed the rocks not ten feet over her head and came to a halt hovering in mid air. Armoured figures with strange mask-like faces looked down inscrutably at her, their eyes glowing redly.

She took to her heels.

There was a flat cracking sound and a nimbus of electric blue flame enveloped her, causing every muscle to convulse in shock. The light died, a dull numbness replaced the pain and the world grew dark about her. With a curious sense of detachment Sarah collapsed insensibly to the ground.

'And then I woke up here,' Sarah concluded. She had abridged her account somewhat, and hoped desperately that her genuine and unfeigned ignorance of where she was and what Baal represented would deter him from probing further. 'Now please will you let me go?'

Baal Garikth-tal shook his head in an almost human manner. 'She still expects freedom,' he said, as though speaking for the benefit of others. 'And shows none of the natural responses to her situation. Her mind is clearly damaged, but she may be useful for basic labour. Undoubtedly she is from a human outpost: a survivor of the recent freighter crash. That's the truth, isn't it, human?'

'I honestly don't know exactly how I got here,' Sarah replied carefully.

'The ship's manifest is no longer on file so her identity cannot be confirmed, not that it matters. Guards.'

Two large forms stepped forward out of the darkness, red eyes glowing. Sarah recognized the things that had piloted the disc: robots, of course, their faces shaped in a parody of their alien master's, cowled eyes on top of their heads and broad speaker grilles mimicking the wide mouth.

'Confirm records for past three work cycles: have any unauthorized craft been detected?' Baal queried.

'None, Master,' one of the robots replied, its voice flat and toneless.

'Double the patrols over the wastelands as a precaution.

Meanwhile assign this creature an identification disc and put her to work – aptitude level three.'

'Work? What do you mean?' Sarah protested.

'As a member of an inferior race you either work to serve the cause of Averon, or you die,' Baal said with brutal simplicity. 'For example: Guard 16 – direct integral projector at subject's head. Prepare to fire a maximum energy burst.'

To Sarah's horror the left arm of the nearest robot lifted obediently to point between her eyes. She realized its arms were differentiated: the right had a large five-fingered hand similar to Baal's, but the left ended in a heavy double-flattened claw like the jaws of a vice, which opened wide to allow a thick transparent rod to emerge. She gasped in fear, twisted her head aside and pulled futilely at her bonds. The robot's right hand caught hold of her chin to hold her still and brought the gun muzzle up to her forehead.

'I'll work, I'll work!' she choked out.

'That is wise,' Baal said. 'Put the identifier on her.'

The other robot had gathered something from a part of the chamber Sarah could not see. Now it was held up before her eyes. It was an oval plate of blue metal perhaps three inches across and two wide, slightly curved, with the boldly embossed number 1073 picked out on it in red. The robot reversed the plate. Two short pins projected from its other face. Before Sarah realized what was intended the plate was pressed hard against her forehead. She yelped in pain as the pins stabbed through her flesh and into the bone beneath. Then there was just a surprising cold numbness. The bands that had restrained her snapped open. She dropped to her knees, sickened, trying to draw her stiff and aching arms up so that she could tear at the plate.

'Any attempt to remove the identifier by force will automatically release a lethal electric discharge,' Baal warned.

Sarah very slowly lowered her hands. 'It also incorporates a locator, and will be triggered remotely if you cross a forbidden perimeter or fail in your work. There is no escape. Take her away.'

The image of Baal faded from the screen. One of the robots caught Sarah under her arm and lifted her effortlessly to her feet. She staggered along in its metallic grasp as it led her through a door and down a long corridor. A second heavier door slid open and she

blinked in the sudden sunlight as they emerged from one of the domes at the centre of the complex she had observed from the heights earlier, with the mast now rising high over her head.

As the robot took her through a gate in the fence that separated the domes from the rest of the compound, Sarah tried to pull herself together. It was not the easiest of mental exercises to undertake, since she felt about as despondent and hopeless at the present moment as she could ever remember.

Steeling herself she cautiously touched the plate on her forehead with her free hand. It didn't hurt at all, but she was acutely aware of its presence, and she felt sick again. Just what sort of a hole she had got herself into, and where were the Doctor and Harry?

Once through the gate the robot led her past the nearest of the long low factory-like buildings and she heard the whirr and buzz of machinery. From ground level she now saw it had several large open doorways, through which figures were visible working purposefully at some sort of production line.

The workers seemed to be of several different species, but they had one thing in common: as far as she could tell they all wore identifier plates. Her feet began to drag again dejectedly at the sight. As the robot's pace was a little faster than she could comfortably walk, she began to feel as though her arm was going to be pulled off at the socket. Indignation and defiance welled up within her and she burst out, 'Oi, slow down – I won't be any good to you if I can't use my arm!'

She winced even as she spoke, instantly regretting her words and expecting some sort of punishment for her outburst.

But to her surprise and relief the robot modified its pace and eased its grip slightly.

'Thanks,' she said automatically. She tried to examine the impassive machine objectively as it clumped along at her side, its powerful form looming head and shoulders over her. Its outer body shell, she now saw, was patterned with scales of different sizes, even around its plate-reinforced joints, giving the impression that it had actually grown in place. Was this further mimicry of its masters, or the result of some unusual manufacturing process? Clearly it was more than an animated suit of armour and must be quite sophisticated mentally to respond as it had. Probably it was just doing its job as it had been

programmed to, she rationalized. It might kill her without compunction if ordered, but it wouldn't be needlessly cruel; that was a human, and apparently alien, failing. She phrased a question carefully: 'Just so I can perform my work more efficiently, can you tell me what I'm going to be doing?'

'Basic manual labour,' the machine responded in its clear but toneless voice. 'Unpacking and distribution of new components to required locations in assembly building.'

'And, in the interests of efficiency again, what is it you actually assemble here?'

The robot was surprisingly forthcoming, but of course there was hardly any point in keeping it secret in the circumstances.

'Synthonic weapons systems. Mobile autonomous devices of various types and functions.'

'You mean like you?'

'That is correct.'

Sarah decided to chance her luck. 'Has anybody ever escaped from here?'

The robot's reply was unexpected. 'All new workers ask this. Instructions require we indicate that spot.'

It stopped and pointed with one of its massive arms to a low hillock just beyond the outer perimeter, studded with many low mounds of earth and a variety of stakes and short posts, some with crosspieces. It was a graveyard.

7

Guided Tour

hope your quarters are comfortable, Doctor,' Cara Tarron said, as

'I they seated themselves in the travel tube capsule.

The door hissed shut and the capsule moved smoothly and silently

away from the residential station in the main complex, dived into a tunnel and began to pick up speed. Through a transparent wall on their right they could see out over the Valley, along the side of which they were travelling.

The Doctor beamed at her. His mood, much improved since yesterday's meeting in the conference room, was now charming, indulgent and full of bonhomie. 'Well, Academ Tarron...ah, may I call you Cara, as we're going to be working together?'

Cara felt an unexpected glow of pleasure at his request.

'Why, certainly, Doctor.'

'Well then, Cara; my quarters are very satisfactory and I had a most comfortable night, thank you. And thank you also for giving me this tour.'

'It's nothing,' she said lightly. 'I had the morning free anyway. The first reports on MICA won't be ready for a few hours yet.'

'When I must start earning my bed and board.'

'Not at all. Any assistance or advice you may give is purely voluntary; I thought that was made perfectly clear.'

'Oh, perfectly. But I do like to know where I stand in such matters.' He glanced at her with engaging innocence. 'There are so many subtle pressures that can be brought to bear on one, don't you think?'

Cara looked at him curiously, but at that moment daylight disappeared and the internal capsule lights came on automatically. The capsule had left the main Valley circuit line and the transparent tube wall had been replaced by solid rock.

'The spaceport is up in the mountains beyond the end of the Valley,' she explained, 'but it doesn't take long to get there.'

In a minute the capsule began to slow, the tunnel opened out and they glided into another underground station. The door opened and they stepped on to a platform deserted save for a few freight cartons being loaded on to a cargo capsule and a couple of guards. The Doctor noted the latter and the security cameras with interest.

'Are these very evident precautions on my account?

Keeping a close eye on me in case I turn out to be a spy after all? Waiting to see if I get careless with my miniature camera, or have a bomb hidden under my sinister black cloak?' He grinned hugely and pulled a fold of his scarf mask-like across the lower half of his face.

Cara looked surprised, then chuckled. 'I hardly notice them most of the time, myself. And of course we trust you, Doctor, or else the Director would never have allowed you to come here. The security may have been stepped up because of the sightings of this mystery ship. We'll probably have an emergency shelter drill in a few days – don't worry, directions will be given on all the public wall screens telling you what to do.'

'I'm sure it will be handled very efficiently,' the Doctor said sincerely. 'But has Deepcity actually ever been attacked?'

'No, never. We're well armed, of course, but our best weapon is concealment. If we were ever discovered, even if we beat off an initial attack, the Union would know there's something important here. They probably guess a facility like Deepcity must exist, and once they found it they'd throw everything they had against us. Even if they couldn't destroy us outright, all they'd need to do is enforce a blockade to prevent weapons leaving. We lose enough shipments through chance interceptions as it is; a siege would mean the end of our usefulness – and probably the war.'

As they talked, they had made their way across to an observation window that looked out over the cold volcanic tube of the landing basin. A fan of service tunnels and hangars opened on to the opposite side, their worklights twinkling.

One ship was currently being rolled out on to the levelled floor of the shaft ready for launching. The Doctor ducked down to see the small circle of blue sky at the shaft's upper end. 'Does it ever get very busy here?' he asked.

'Sometimes nothing for days, then ships come and go so quickly the crews don't even disembark.'

'Do you travel yourself much?'

Cara wondered if he'd read her expression as she watched the ship being prepared. 'Not as much as I'd like, I admit. It sometimes gets, well, claustrophobic here. I've been to Alliance worlds a few times, but you can't make unnecessary journeys, of course – security again. When we do get leave, which is essential for morale as you can guess,

we take it on Oceanus. It's picturesque, I suppose, but not a real world, if you see what I mean. It's not home.' She hesitated, then asked,

'Do you remember anything of your homeworld yet?'

'Just flashes,' he admitted. 'Snatches of faces and scenes that I assume are from my homeworld. But I can't place them in any context, and without that they make very little sense.'

He took a key from his pocket and held it up for her to see. 'I have this but no lock for it to open. Perhaps it fits the door of my own house. Rather like the problem with my mind, but reversed. There I can't find the right key for the lock.

Somewhere there's a word that will make everything fall into place. At least, I hope there is.'

They returned to their capsule. It reversed and headed back the way it had come, rejoined the main tube line and then made a long curve around the head of the Valley. As they sped along the side of the tunnel it opened out again, giving a magnificent view of the open expanse of the Valley floor, the fringe of forest around its foothills, the unbroken sheer wall of encircling peaks rising high above them, cut through by the occasional white threads of waterfalls, all under a blue sky dotted with feathery clouds.

'We're travelling along the other side from the main complex itself,' Tarron explained. 'This is where the fabrication plants and factory are situated – dug into the cliff side like the rest, of course. You'll see them in a minute.'

'How many people are there in Deepcity?'

'About eleven thousand and growing steadily. Quite a few families were here when Landor was lost – the City was always intended to be as complete and self-contained as possible. Those children have grown now and are having children of their own.'

'Well, it looks very pleasant and certainly spacious enough for them all. At least fifty kilometres long, I'd say, and you can always drill more tunnels.'

'Try it for twenty years, Doctor. Hidden away on some nameless planet which you can never explore because you can't leave the only shielded location. Looking up at nameless stars at night from a world

you've never even seen from space because you come and go in closed ships. Do you realize that spaceship crews who have to know this planet's coordinates, are subconsciously conditioned to mindwipe or suicide if they are captured.'

'What you don't know you can't tell, I suppose?'

'It's necessary – but is it an ideal place to bring up children? Still, they seem happy enough. Perhaps what they never knew they don't miss.'

'A remarkably adaptable species, *homo sapiens astronauticus*, as I've always said. One of my favourites.'

Cara smiled uncertainly. 'I keep forgetting you're not – I mean, is that really what you think of us?'

The Doctor frowned. 'I think so – most of the time, anyway.'

The tube dived into the rock once more and the capsule glided into the factory station.

The multiple production lines ran through vast subterranean halls for five kilometres. Raw materials entered at one end and finished articles ranging from handguns to tanks emerged at the other, the entire process being monitored by a small workforce of humans and robots. The whine, clatter and hiss of a thousand machines filled the air with a constant drone of sound. It always put Cara in mind of the combs in an archaic beehive, even though she knew it was a strange parallel to draw between honey and instruments of war. They proceeded along the observation gantry until they reached the end of the line and looked down on to stacked cartons of hand weapons, rows of tanks with twin energy cannon, battle crawlers and gleaming ranks of motionless synthonic troopers waiting for shipment.

'Is that shape really efficient in combat?' the Doctor wondered, pointing to the troopers.

'The humanoid form is quite adaptable, as you said earlier, but there is also a psychological factor. The Averonians are also humanoid, and they supply similar synthoids to other members of the Union – sometimes our pirated and copied models. By producing equivalent devices we counter the image of their machines, and remind the rest of the Alliance that humans are still part of this war, even if we haven't got the manpower to fight directly. No, that's not quite right: our navy is still out there. Somewhere there may be a starship production centre like Deepcity, but its location is even more secret

than this place, if that's possible. Nobody asks.'

They returned to the tube capsule. Tarron's fingers hesitated over the controls.

'Apart from the test zones out in the Valley floor, which we'll visit later, there's only the power plant at the other end of the Valley. Do you want to see that?'

'What type is it?'

'An old multiple torus magno-fusion stack. Normally we'd use solar receptors, but the area we'd need would show up from space too easily.'

'Well, I always say when you've seen one multiple torus magno-fusion stack you've seen them all. I think we'll pass it by for the present.'

Tarron smiled and set the controls. The capsule sped away, curving round the opposite end of the Valley, and back along into the central complex again. They passed the service centre and laboratories, and glided to a halt at the residential section stop once more.

'And that is our little world, Doctor,' Tarron said as the door opened. The Doctor gallantly helped her out on to the platform.

'Thank you for showing it to me. I hope I haven't kept you from anything important.'

Tarron studied her feet in embarrassment for a moment, before looking up at him ruefully. 'Actually, showing you around was suggested to me by Dr Emberley. Contact with an outsider, you see. It's part of my therapy. I've had a touch of what we call "Deep Syndrome"...'

The Doctor listened patiently and sympathetically as she explained. But when she was done he suddenly looked perplexed. 'It's all right,' he reassured her, 'I don't mind. It's just that I never thought of myself as a patent medicine before.'

Elyze Brant entered lab three after lunch to find it in semi-darkness. The entire staff was gathered before the big screen at the front of the room which was displaying a dense jumble of complex formulae, equations and sketches of mechanical parts. More appeared even as she watched, being scribbled at remarkable speed. She saw the Doctor hunched over the input screen, writing and fielding questions from his

evidently attentive audience at the same time.

After a minute Cara Tarron saw her, withdrew quietly from the group and came over, brushing back her hair tiredly as she did so.

'It looks baffling. Can you understand it?' Elyze asked simply.

Cara smiled. 'Some. Enough to know I don't know half as much as he does.'

'But you're sure it's genuine?'

'Oh, yes – just very advanced.'

'I hope you're recording.'

'Of course.'

'And will it help with MICA?'

'Probably not.'

'But I thought you said –'

'Yes, the Doctor's ideas are brilliant conceptually,' Cara explained, 'but to use them would mean redesigning half the existing systems, and we haven't got the time. We might incorporate some of them into the mark 2, but for the moment we'll have to make do with what we've got.'

For a moment Elyze felt acute dismay, then she chuckled and muttered, 'So much for that.'

'Pardon?'

'Never mind. What's next for our wonderman?'

'Don't sound so dismissive. He can be quite charming –

and funny.'

'Sorry.' She looked at Cara intently and the other read her meaning.

'You can tell Dr Emberley that the therapy is working already. I'm feeling a lot better.'

'That's good news,' Elyze said with feeling. 'I was beginning to get

worried about you.'

'Well, don't any more. I think I'm over the worst.' She looked at her watch. 'We're going to take the Doctor out to the test zones to see a live fire exercise soon, in preparation for the MICA trials. Maybe when he's seen the sharp end of our work he can come up with a few more modest, and practical, suggestions.'

The battle team of six Glarrocks scuttled through the ruins.

They resembled upright armadillos, with armoured plates and weapon pouches strapped over their pale bellies to supplement their own natural segmented hides. Each carried a high intensity force rifle, and, though they were large and powerful creatures, they also moved quickly and silently.

Their target came into view: a synthonic trooper stalking along a weed-choked alley between crumbling brick walls, its red eyes scanning ceaselessly from side to side within the recessed visor slot of its helmet. In its human-patterned right hand it carried a heavy plasma blaster.

The Glarrocks timed their ambush perfectly, rising from cover and firing simultaneously. Three shots actually struck the trooper, punching holes in its body shell and sending it staggering backwards, before its own gun swung up. Two balls of blue-white fire spat forth and struck two of its attackers, taking the head off one, and the shoulder and arm off the other. Then the plasma blaster was shattered by a second volley of force bolts. Throwing it aside the trooper charged at the nearest brick wall, its heavier clawed arm punching forward to smash a hole in the brickwork and drive its body through after it. Then it was gone in a cloud of dust and fragments leaving a man-sized hole behind it, even as force bolts peppered the wall. The surviving Glarrocks divided into pairs and scampered for either end of the long protecting wall even as there came the dull double thump of the trooper's integral backpack grenade launcher. Ground and rubble erupted about two of the running creatures, tossing them briefly into the air only to crash motionless to earth. Before the last pair of Glarrocks could round the wall there was a grinding splintering groan as the trooper pushed the end section over. It broke across the alien soldiers, flattening them to the ground. One of the Glarrocks was completely buried, but the other managed to scramble free, protected by its thick hide, but losing its force rifle in the process. The trooper pounded through the rubble towards it even as the Glarrock rose and flung itself forward. The two powerful forms collided, the impact

actually knocking the trooper backwards.

An armoured paw smashed into its integral visor. Then the trooper's own arm lifted and fell just once. There was a sound like the crack of a tree branch. The trooper released its grip on its assailant and the Glarrock fell to the ground and lay still.

A siren sounded and the trooper froze into immobility. A heavily armoured door in one of the more substantial buildings swung open and the Doctor, Cara and a handful of technicians emerged and walked over to the site of the battle.

The Doctor prodded the fallen Glarrock with his toe. Close to the moulding joints in the computer-controlled manikin's body shell, innumerable patched and replaced plates and chipped paint from previous test zone battles were plain to see.

The trooper's armoured skin was pitted with several deep force-bolt pits, but these were already filling with some glistening sticky fluid. The Doctor peered at it closely.

Already the small scaled plates about the damaged sections seemed to be growing.

'Self-repairing?' he asked Cara.

'Yes, up to a point. All our synthonic devices have some version of the system, but it works best on units of this size.

The exact formulation is restricted, but I'm sure you can make an educated guess.'

The Doctor dabbed his finger in one of the ‘wounds’ and sniffed the fluid. ‘Mmm,, an electrosensitive polymer suspension of metal salts?’ Tarron nodded. The Doctor beamed and put a finger secretively to his lips.

‘We’re always modifying and improving the troopers,’ said a young technician enthusiastically, striding over to them,

‘they’re our most successful design. For all the airpower, missiles and heavy weapons you employ, no combat zone is safe until ground forces have physically occupied it and located and subdued every last unit of the opposition. And that requires precision application of force, often hand to hand.

Then there are the psychological factors. Friend and foe alike relate to a simulacrum of a living warrior in interesting ways –

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‘Why don’t you,’ said the Doctor sharply, ‘make dummies that bleed when they’re damaged? Just to remind yourselves that these clever toys actually kill living beings.’

The technician was unabashed. ‘They say the Averonians use live prisoners to test their weapons. Would you rather we did the same?’

The balloon-tyred wide wheel-based ground car bumped along the track that wound between the test zones back towards the cliff wall that housed the main complex. The Doctor slumped in his seat, brooding, his feet propped up on the dashboard and his hat pulled down over his eyes.

‘There is no other way to test combat units,’ Cara pointed out once again.

‘I know. But think of it as another aspect of the isolation you complained about this morning. You mustn’t lose touch with the reality of what you’re doing.’

Cara sighed. ‘Well, it’s not the sort of advice we expected, but I’ll put it forward.’

The Doctor tilted his hat back and smiled at her. ‘I think that would be very sensible…Hello – who’s this: Cecil B. de Mille?’

They were passing a reproduction of a section of an alien forest, dotted with large coniform growths sprouting colourful plumes of feathery leaves from their tips. Moving through them was another party of dummy warriors, while a small group of Deepcity personnel were busily engaged in filming their progress.

'Just Neels Prander making one of his training yids,' Cara explained. 'Now he knows about adding realism to the animates.'

They pulled up and waited patiently beside the car for the scene to end. At last Prander waved to them cheerily and came over.

'I'm glad to see you again, Doctor. I wanted to ask if you would sit for me.'

'For a portrait, you mean?'

'Yes. There's a gallery on the promenade level, and, well, we don't get that many distinguished visitors.'

The Doctor appeared to swell under this flattery. He thrust out his jaw and attempted to study his own reflection in the car's side window. 'Well, I do have a certain profile which has been commented upon favourably.'

'Has it? I mean is your memory coming back?'

'Some sizeable gaps remain,' the Doctor admitted, continuing to admire his reflection. 'Knowledge without source or proper chronological structure – most disconcerting, I assure you. I still can't recall the coordinates of my homeworld for example.' He turned his disconcerting pale eyes on to Prander. 'However, we were just admiring your handiwork.'

They crossed to the synthetic alien warriors, now standing quite motionless. They were small slim beings with dark purple skins like polished leather, and tiny faces at the end of curiously elongated thrusting heads. The detailing of their harness and individual physiognomies was far more complete than the Glarrocks' had been.

'Most convincing,' the Doctor commented after a few moments' study.

'You've got to have realism to tell the truth,' Prander explained with evident feeling. 'What I produce here are hardly works of art, but they serve an important function.

Recognition of Alliance and Union members, battle techniques of enemy species based on our data banks, and so on. The results are sent out with weapons shipments. It's so important that the various races of the Alliance know who they are up against and how many different species are involved in the struggle.'

The Doctor pointed to the realistic injuries that had been applied to some of the dummies. 'I see you believe in displaying blood and suffering where appropriate.'

'Oh yes,' Prander replied with almost tangible passion, 'I believe in its importance. I don't want anyone to forget the suffering Averon has brought us.'

The Doctor looked at him intently for a moment. 'Yes,' he agreed, 'I can see how important it is to you.' And he turned and walked back to the car with his head bowed in thought.

8

Special Guest

he massive awning supported by a hastily erected geodetic fram

T ework trembled with the sound of uproarious applause from almost four thousand Jand soldiers. The act they cheered was not that outstanding, but the men were happy. Except for a few isolated units currently being mopped up, the Nethrass invasion force had been routed and pushed off Jand. And so the victors were enjoying a spot of what Harry thought of as old-fashioned 'R and R'. A live show had been put on, revealing that the spirit of wartime ENSA concert parties roamed freely between the stars.

The show was also for their distinguished guests. Some Landoran Alliance spacefleet personnel were seated in the front row with the local Jand dignitaries and senior officers.

Harry wasn't sure he wanted to meet Landorans at that moment, even for the pleasure of seeing another human face.

They might ask awkward questions about who he was and how he got here. So he sat in the semi-darkness a few rows back, along with the junior officers and other members of Chell'lak's staff that he'd come to

know over the last few days. They seemed to take it as a gesture of comradeship to those with whom he had been under fire, which suited him perfectly. Besides, he was fully entitled to such a position. He was wearing a Jand military sash and honorary rank insignia of a hectander, which Chell had presented to him personally.

Chell himself was in the front row with the rest. Harry glimpsed him from time to time apparently trying to talk urgently to the Landorans on some matter. Unfortunately the entertainment kept interfering with the conversation.

Some acts, such as tumbling, juggling and acrobatics, Harry could enjoy without special effort. These also seemed to feature scantily clad female Jand, whose charms left him untouched, but were evidently deeply appreciated by his companions. A knockabout comedy routine was likewise comprehensible – apparently Jand soldiers liked a pratfall as much as their Earthly counterparts. Spoken humour was more difficult to comprehend, relying on nuances his re-attuned mind did not always pick up. Songs were hardest on his ears, as the Jand seemed to use a semi-atonal musical scale. Still he hummed along with a few of the choruses that were evidently popular favourites with the men, and decided that, as a doctor, it was just the tonic he would have prescribed for battle-weary troops.

Then, right at the end of the programme, came an unexpected announcement. As the curtains closed on the last billed act, the compere came forward to the front of the stage and raised his hands for silence.

‘Your attention, please. I have great pleasure presenting a special guest. For security reasons his presence could not be revealed to you earlier, and sadly he cannot stay with us long.

But he has specially requested this opportunity to address you.

He was the commander of the Alliance fleet at the battle of Norrcon Beacon, and the taking of Falence Nine. We are honoured to welcome Admiral Zeff Dorling of the Alliance Spaceforce!’

A surprised murmur dissolved into a thunderous round of applause as the curtains parted to reveal a wiry, grey-haired human, dressed in an immaculate midnight-black uniform with his right arm in a sling. He saluted the Jand soldiers and patiently waited for the applause to die down, smiling gently.

Then he spoke in a clear and robust voice with a hearty resonance to

it.

‘Thank you, friends, comrades...for whatever our origins we must never forget we are all comrades in this great struggle against the forces of Averon. I wished particularly to speak to you today, because you have been fighting for something which has a very special meaning for me. No, not your own lives, important though they are – every soldier knows his own life cannot be held that high. Nor do I mean the safety of your families and loved ones, dear as they must be to you personally. No, I am talking of the freedom, the life, perhaps the very existence, of Jand itself!’

Harry felt a stir of emotion run through the audience, and a close tension building up under the lofty tent. Admiral Dorling continued.

‘Yes, your world! What greater prize can there be, yet what more precious and worthy thing to defend. The birthplace of your race countless millions of years ago, the cradle of your civilization, the mother earth that fed you; that is what your enemy the Nethrass, and through them Averon, has been trying to take from you! Shall they have it?’

‘No!’ came several shouts.

‘No, they will not,’ Dorling agreed. ‘Because they have underestimated two things: the courage of the Jand and the strength of the Alliance!’

Scattered cheering interrupted him. With his good hand Dorling gently signalled for quiet, then continued in a more sombre tone.

‘I speak as one who has seen his own world destroyed by the forces of Averon. I would not wish what happened to Landor to happen to any other.’

Harry was aware of sympathetic glances from those around him. So that explained Chell’s strange question when they first met. He tried to look suitably angry but resolute, which came easily in the circumstances. He found himself sweating and ran a finger round his collar, even as he thought what unspeakable monsters these Averonians must be to destroy a world!

‘Interstellar war,’ Dorling continued, ‘is the greatest abomination that the Averon Union has ever perpetrated upon its innocent and peace-loving neighbours. Yes, they are strong

– but we united together are stronger! They shall not win. We shall

not let them win! We shall fight them on the ground, in the air, in the depths of space. Whether it takes one year or a hundred, we shall not rest until their so-called “Union” is broken for ever and every one of their miserable allies has been sent back to their own worlds beaten and cowed!’

The cheers and shouts were louder and fiercer than before, and Harry found himself adding his own voice to them, righteous anger now smouldering within him. Dorling signalled for silence for the last time.

‘I give you my pledge and that of all the forces the Alliance commands. We are beside you and share your goals: Victory over Nethrass! Crush the Union! Death to Averon!’

And the whole audience rose to its feet, punching the air with clenched fists, shouting, stamping their feet and repeating the chant over and over again. And Harry was standing with them, feeling at that moment as vengeful and determined as any Jand.

‘Victory over Nethrass! Crush the Union! Death to Averon!’

9

Courage

he tone sounded loudly three times within the long wo

T rkshed.

‘End of second work period,’ Baal announced, his amplified voice echoing through the building. There was a large visi screen mounted on the wall over every assembly line, and they often worked under the Averonian’s magnified gaze.

Machinery hummed to a stop and the workers downed tools and stepped back from their places, massaging aching arms and backs. Sarah put down the bundle of synthonic body shell parts she had been carrying and joined the others as they formed up into ranks for counting. At a signal from the guard they filed out, at the same time as the next shift was marched in through, another door. The assembly line worked around the clock.

‘So ends another fun-filled day,’ Sarah observed wearily, dragging her

feet as they were marched out of the factory compound. The thin air made all work seem that much more tiring.

‘That’s about how they go, Seventy-three,’ 829 agreed.

829 was a lean middle-aged human woman from a Landoran outpost world. She must have had a name, but like many other workers she seemed to have abandoned it, referring to herself and others solely by their ident plate numbers. Whether this was a defensive mechanism to distance themselves from some traumatic past event or simply surrendering to the system, Sarah wasn’t sure, but she was determined not to follow their example. I have a name not a number, she reminded herself firmly, but she still felt like a prisoner. Apart from the ubiquitous synthonic guards (‘synths’

as everybody called them disparagingly) there were several more large visi screens mounted on pylons over most stretches of fencing, so that Baal could oversee almost every part of the camp. It also meant they had to look up at his image when he gave orders or made announcements.

Once through the gate into the living quarters section they were allowed to break ranks. Wearily they trudged into the general hall, queued for their bowls of food and plastic cutlery, and slumped at benches and tables stained and worn smooth by years of use. The food was some bland synthetic, with very little taste, apparently formulated to be palatable to the wide range of species that made up the workforce.

‘It could be worse,’ 829 said, seeing Sarah’s face as she ate.

‘That’s the problem!’ Sarah snapped back.

She could already feel herself being drawn into the routine of the camp. The awful simplicity of acceptance, of saying: well, the worst has happened and I can live with it. The work is hard but not totally soul-destroying or body-breaking, the conditions are austere but not intolerably so. There’s no real hope of rescue, so why waste energy on hope? All decisions were made for you, so why bother to think? It could have been worse.

Some workers, she learnt from 829, had been there for years. ‘There are about three thousand here on average,’ she explained. ‘Some are prisoners of war handed over by other Union allies according to some sort of quota, a few are Union personnel sent here for punishment, but most are Alliance civilians caught in raids on outposts or ships, often

scientists or senior diplomatic staff.'

'But why go to all that trouble?' Sarah wondered.

'Snatching the higher ranking ones must cause panic on their homeworlds – indecision, not knowing if they're alive or dead; perhaps they can extract some useful information out of some of them, and I suppose they would make useful hostages if it came down to it. But mostly I think Averonians simply like collecting important people and making them do menial work.'

'And has anybody ever escaped successfully?' Sarah asked.

'None that I've heard of,' 829 said.

The synthoid guards were the first obstacle. Aside from their integral weapons they were as strong as ten men.

Attacking them physically was futile, but even so any such attempt was severely punished. They applied discipline rigidly but impartially, without any malice or cruelty, and you could call them any names you wanted without insulting them. In all they made bad targets for hate or resentment, which was reserved for their masters up on Averon, especially Baal.

Meanwhile the synthoids oversaw everything, never sleeping, eternally vigilant. And even if you could somehow bypass them and the electrified perimeter fence, there was always the ident plates. Nobody knew what the effective radius of control was, but there seemed little chance of ever getting beyond it before they were activated. And even if you did, where was there to run to?

There was rumoured to be a naval base somewhere else on the moon, which would probably be even better guarded and more dangerous than the work camp. Sarah had already seen the highlands and doubted if you could live there very long, and the lava plain offered nothing better.

Then a terrible thought struck her for the first time: suppose Harry or the Doctor had also landed up there in the highlands?

No. If they had then the extra patrols Baal had ordered would have found them by now, or they would have found the base as she had. Unless they were dead. No! She would not believe that.

Depressed by her thoughts and the company, Sarah made her way to

the washrooms adjacent to her dormitory hall, which was assigned to all female workers irrespective of their species. The water was tepid and laced with cleaning and anti-bacterial chemicals. Averon didn't want its workers coming down with inconvenient diseases.

The dormitory itself consisted of row upon row of simple frame bunk beds with the minimum of bedding. The rooms were always either slightly too hot, or slightly too cold. Was it chance or all part of the plan to sap their will a little further?

There were no bedside lockers because nobody had any possessions worthy of note, except the clothes they stood up in. There was a basic automated facility for cleaning clothes.

When they fell to pieces apparently a one-piece coverall was provided. Three-quarters of the workforce wore such utilitarian garments.

For the first few days after her arrival some of the women in her section asked her questions about where she came from.

Unsure of what might reach the ears of Baal, she stuck to generalizations, while learning as much as possible about the history of the war. A few of them simply stared at her, just for the diversion of seeing a new face. The looks some of the men gave her also concerned her at first, but she soon realized she was perfectly safe from any unwanted attentions. The guards made efficient, perhaps too efficient, chaperons. A cry would alert them, and any assault or violent behaviour was ruthlessly punished. Some couples did manage to evade the guards briefly, and perhaps this was tolerated not out of any sense of humanity, but simply in the interests of efficiency. There had to be some safety valves in the system, allowing a few scraps of pleasure to be gleaned.

There was no structured entertainment except what they made for themselves outside working hours, and the general all-pervasive exhaustion limited this mainly to talking and desultory word games and storytelling. The only regular pastime was watching the great cargo ships arrive and depart, perhaps in the forlorn hope of rescue or escape, or simply for the spectacle they offered.

Ships brought supplies and the components of the synthonic weapons up from Averon for final assembly and testing, Most items were factory fresh and had to be unwrapped from their utility packaging, which was one of Sarah's mundane tasks. Occassionally other ships brought parts of damaged battle machines back from war zones on

other worlds, and several times Sarah had wheeled trolley loads of such salvaged items to a small building at the back of one of the worksheds, casually known as the 'junk room', where they were sorted, sealed and labelled. Ships leaving empty regularly carried these specimens away, presumably for further examination on Averon. Infrequently they received a consignment of unused Alliance war machines, captured before they could even be activated. These were reprogrammed and their exteriors refitted with the different markings of Union allies.

'Averons have a malicious sense of humour,' 829 said, confirming her earlier assessment of them. 'They enjoy using our own weapons against us.'

Naturally none of the devices or weapons were powered up until they left the workers' compound. The synthoids handled that final procedure in one of the separate and heavily guarded central domes. Sometimes they saw the results of their labours marching themselves on to the cargo ships out on the lava flats beyond the perimeter fence, where the tiny figures of their alien crews oversaw the loading process. Then the ship would lift off for some far distant Union world, and the workers could only hope the weapons they had helped assemble were not used against their own kind.

As the dormitory began to fill, Sarah rolled herself up in her thin blankets and pulled them over her face, partly so that she would not see the blank faces of her fellows, but mostly so that they would not see hers. She had never been in such a situation: subdued by routine and order that was hard and restrictive enough to function, yet not quite severe enough to make you risk anything to escape it. There seemed nothing to push against. So easy to let go and wait for the Doctor to rescue her, as usual, and let hope dribble through her fingers until there was nothing left. No! She scratched at her ident plate irritably. She must at least try to find some way out. But how? She was too tired. Maybe tomorrow.

'Apathy rules, OK?' she thought dully, then fell asleep.

The next day was a virtual copy of the one before.

The day after proved that the desire for freedom could never be entirely subdued, and courage and determination had not died on Averon's moon.

His number, she found out afterwards, was 178. Though ident plates

were reassigned, perhaps its lowness truly indicated how long he had spent on the moon. Had he just cracked after too many years, or had he been meticulously planning his escape all that time?

It happened at shift changeover. The first thing Sarah heard was a great shout from outside, just as she and 829 emerged from the workshed. They looked up in surprise to see a man from their replacement shift had left his file and was sprinting towards the fence which separated them from the lava flats and the landing field. He seemed to be tying a thick bandanna around his head as he ran.

'He'll never climb it. No toe holds – the mesh is too fine,'

829 said flatly.

The synthoids seemed to think the same, for they held their fire, and one started after the runner at no great pace. But the man leaped at the fence, clung, and began to climb. Sarah could just make out short spikes projecting from the toes of his boots, strips of material wrapped around his hands and, for some reason, trailing wires. The synthoid hesitated for a moment, then raised his gun arm and fired. Blue fire licked around the man. He shivered, but then seemed to shrug off the stun charge and continued climbing. Sparks flowed from his trailing wires into the fence. There was a stir of surprise in the ranks.

'He's earthed and insulated!' somebody shouted.

He must have been. The electrified strands at the top of the fence did not stop him. By the time the synthoid fired at higher power the man was dropping down the other side, and the dense wire mesh absorbed some of the bolt's charge even as it blew apart in molten droplets.

'Do it!' 829 shouted, and for the first time Sarah saw fire and hope in her eyes. She broke ranks and ran to the fence. A synthoid commanded her to stop but she ignored it. The rest surged after her, carrying Sarah along with them. The synthoids fell silent, apparently realizing they were not trying to escape, but the throng slowed them down and divided their attention. Was that why the man was making his escape now, Sarah wondered? They pressed against the fence, grasping the heavy mesh so hard it cut their skin.

'Yes – do it!' 829 was shrieking, and the chant was taken up by the rest.

A synthoid patrolling outside the fence pounded along to intercept the escaper as he hit the ground. The man pulled a ball from inside his

shirt and threw it at the guard's head. It burst like black syrup across its visor, and it reeled about momentarily blinded, clawing at the sticky mess. The man dashed past it, heading for the flat cars parked outside the perimeter fence which were used to load and unload cargo packs from the ships.

'Yes! Run! Do it!' they chanted and shouted. Just one man, but he was escaping for all of them.

Then they felt the tingle in their ident plates: the leakage across the channels of a massive surge of power. Whatever shielding the man had used over his own plate against the standard signal was insufficient to stop the high intensity burst triggered by the guards in the control domes. He clutched his head, staggered another couple of steps, then collapsed.

There was a leaden groan from the rest of the prisoners and a moment of frozen despair. Then they slumped against the fence, the raw energy that had momentarily galvanized them draining away. Sarah saw the light die in 829's eyes. One by one, shoulders drooping, the crowd began to disperse as the guards marshalled them back to their places. A synthoid picked up the escaper's limp body and carried him towards the nearest fence gate.

'He almost made it,' somebody said.

'He got twenty metres beyond the wire – for all the good it did him,' a second retorted angrily. 'Even if he'd reached the cars, where would he have gone?'

'He must have had some plan.'

'You can never get away from the signal,' a third stated.

'Well, at least he had the courage to try,' Sarah said sharply, trying to keep her own hope alive. 'And if it can be done once it can be done again, but better.'

'They'll find out what he was using to shield his plate and make sure it won't work a second time,' 829 said.

'Do you really believe there's no escape?' Sarah asked.

'Only one,' 829 said bitterly. Her eyes turned towards the cemetery.

178's limp form was carried into a control dome by the guards. He

was never seen again.

10

Unorthodox Methods

omar'yat was the administrative capital of Jand's south co

T ntinent. It was a grandly scaled but spacious city, with broad tree-lined boulevards backed by tall buildings fashioned in the curving walled, tiered and domed style Harry was becoming accustomed to. The only significant difference to the more modest structures of the country was the addition of heavy relief ornamentation, giving them a slightly baroque aspect. This contrasted oddly with the bright banners and garlands that hung from trees and across several streets proclaiming victory over the Nethrass. Tomar'yat had not escaped the war unscathed, as the gutted shells of several buildings along its First Avenue showed, but the debris was already being cleared away and Chell's staff car only had to make a couple of detours to reach its destination.

This was a large public building with a landing platform on its flat roof. As they approached they saw a Landoran space ferry lift off and vanish into the clouds, presumably to rendezvous with the battle squadron presently in orbit over Jand.

Harry's heart sank at the sight. He did not want to meet any Landorans just yet, but it was hard to refuse Chell, who seemed to think that his support might add weight to the proposal he was taking to his allies. Harry didn't want to disillusion the solider, but he feared his presence would be anything but helpful.

The upper two floors of the building had been assigned to the Landorans as temporary quarters, and there Harry, Chell and his aide Nacroth'ves waited for twenty minutes in an ante-room before being ushered into the presence of Commodore Gillsen and three members of his staff, seated along one side of a large imposing table. Gillsen was a clean-cut vigorous man only a few years older than Harry, but his clipped perfunctory manner did not bode well and his searching glance as Harry was introduced was most disconcerting. Chell started to explain his scheme, but Gillsen interrupted.

‘Excuse me, Dekkilander Chell’lak, but I must first ask for clarification as to the status of “Lieutenant Sullivan”. I see he is wearing a Jand service sash, but I was not aware of any Landorans in Jand military service, nor on Jand at all outside my own crews and our small diplomatic mission. How does he come to be here?’

‘Do you not recognize him, Commodore?’ Chell asked.

‘We thought he was from your force; an escape pod survivor, perhaps. He has suffered loss of memory.’

‘All our men are accounted for,’ Gillsen said frostily.

Harry took a deep breath. There was no avoiding the matter any further. ‘It’s true that when I arrived here my memory was playing me up, sir,’ he said respectfully, ‘and I wasn’t entirely sure who I was or where I came from. But over the last few days pretty well everything has come back to me, and I know I’m not from anywhere round here. I’m certainly not a Landoran.’ He could see Chell looking at him in surprise, and added, ‘I know it’s a bit of a shock, but perhaps if I explained everything?’

‘I think perhaps you’d better, Sullivan,’ Gillsen said.

Harry related a condensed version of his origins and arrival on Jand, keeping the more fantastic elements such as Time Lords and TARDISes carefully vague. When he finished, Gillsen conducted a whispered dialogue with one of his staff, who eventually nodded, and left the room. ‘This story will have to be investigated, of course,’ Gillsen said stiffly to Chell. ‘Meanwhile it would be best if this man withdraws while we discuss your proposal, Dekkilander Chell’lak.’

‘Harry’sullivan is here as my personal assistant,’ Chell replied with equal stiffness. ‘Whatever his past may or may not be, I vouch for his character and wish him to remain.’

‘Very well,’ Gillsen said with evident reluctance.

‘Proceed.’

‘I believe we have a means to bring this war with the Nethrass, and perhaps other conflicts, to a rapid conclusion,’

said Chell bluntly. That got the Landorans’ attention, Harry noted with a smile. They all sat up and looked at Chell very hard indeed. Chell signalled to Nacroth’ves, who placed a slim case on the table and

opened it up to display the contents. The Landorans frowned at the electronics package bristling with buttons, meters and sprays of coiled wire connectors contained within. Chell continued: 'It is the advanced weaponry that the Nethrass obtain from their masters on Averon that allows them to perpetrate this war. Without those they would never dare attempt a landing on Jand. Averon itself may be impregnable, but it has been speculated that the Union uses some secret intermediate staging post or distribution centre for its shipments. If we can track a vessel to that and it could be eliminated or blockaded –'

'Excuse me,' one of Gillsen's aides interrupted with a trace of condescension in his words. 'This idea has been put forward many times before. The problems of tracking and intercepting a ship in deep space, let alone hyper-space, are simply too great for it to be practical.'

Chell gave a toothy Jand smile. 'Our scientists may not be the equal of yours in some fields of knowledge and many of our research centres lie in ruins thanks to the war, but we are not without ingenuity.' He tapped the device in the case. 'This is a detector amplifier unit, compatible with the systems your ships employ. I am told it will increase their efficiency, and so their effective range, by between three and five hundred per cent, making continuous detection and tracking of ships in both normal and hyperspace a realistic possibility for the first time. Here are the results of our tests.' He handed over a bound sheaf of computer printouts and graphs. 'You will see they confirm the improved performance of a standard detector array using the new equipment.'

Harry thought the Landorans looked a little unsettled by Chell's presentation. They'd probably become accustomed to being at the leading edge of technological innovation. Well, perhaps their complacency needed a little shake-up.

'This is clearly most remarkable,' Gillsen said after a few minutes' study. 'Have you attempted to use this device in practice yet?'

'No. That is why we need your help. The tracer is useless without a fast craft to carry it. Only Landoran ships equal those of Averon in speed and armament. If this unit could be mounted in one of your craft –'

'Regrettably that is not possible,' Gillsen said flatly.

Chell looked astonished. 'For such an opportunity you cannot spare

one ship? Not even a destroyer?'

'At this moment we can spare neither a ship nor a crew to try an essentially untested device such as this.' He leant forward intently. 'Why do you think we let your navy engage the last of the Nethrass ships? We took heavy losses during our encounter with the Averons, and considerable secondary damage. Presently we are undertaking essential repairs and maintenance and giving a battle-weary crew some much needed shore leave.'

'Then we will supply the crew,' Chell said. 'We have more trained men than ships at present. Perhaps they could help with your repairs.'

'The offer is appreciated, but I must still refuse. Besides, the decision to incorporate alien technology into our craft is not one I am qualified to make. It will have to be determined at a higher level and the device assessed by our own technical staff. Perhaps, in due course, when they have –'

Chell sniffed loudly, wrinkling his snout, indicating profound displeasure. 'I expected better from a Landoran officer. Are you incapable of taking responsibility for such a decision? If we delay we shall lose the opportunity to act now, when the Nethrass are at their weakest and most likely to beg additional equipment from Averon.' He closed the case firmly.

'We shall keep the detector until we can utilize it properly ourselves.'

Gillsen said sharply, 'Are you denying the rest of the Alliance the potential benefits of your invention? Is this a good example of cooperation between allies?'

'Is your refusal to loan one ship a better one?' Chell replied in kind.

For a moment Harry thought the meeting might turn violent, but just then the aide who had been sent out earlier re-entered the room and handed a message slip to Gillsen. He read it then turned his gaze on Harry. 'This confirms there is no trace of you in our records, nor any indication as to how you arrived in this sector of space. You will have to provide us with a fuller explanation of your presence here.'

'Us?' Chell said slowly. 'Do you mean collectively those represented here, or just the Landoran military?'

Gillsen hesitated. 'Well, he is human.'

‘So? He is certainly not Averonian, or any member of the Union that I know of. Do you suggest he is a spy, a threat to the Alliance? I have seen him work on the battlefield under fire, treating friend and foe impartially –’

‘But that could mean –’

‘It means he is an innocent outsider, a stranger to our struggle, and dedicated to his profession. He wishes to stay on Jand to look for his friends, and I have no objection to this and neither do the civil authorities. Unless you think Jand is so vital to the Alliance that his presence poses some danger. But you will not even loan us a single ship to bring a speedier end to our troubles, so that can hardly be the case.’

Gillsen was getting red in the face. ‘I only requested that he be –’

‘You did not; you assumed the right to take him as you pleased! You may have lost your world, but that does not give you the right to treat this planet as your own. Remember you are only guests here.’

‘We are also your principle allies and suppliers of vital armaments!’

‘As you frequently remind us.’

‘Ungrateful goats,’ muttered one of the Landorans, undoubtedly a little louder than he intended.

Chell leant over the table and punched him on the nose.

The man beside him lunged at Chell, but Nacroth’ves stepped in, caught his arm, twisted and sent him flying over the table to crash heavily to the floor. The man opposite Harry drew his pistol. Harry vaulted the table and kicked the gun from his hand. The man swung a wild punch at him which Harry blocked, even as he drove a couple of short jabs into his chin which caused his legs to fold under him. The man Chell had punched staggered back uncertainly, nose bleeding, looking as though he contemplated raising the alarm.

Nacroth’ves kicked him carefully in the stomach and he doubled up with a grunt. Gillsen tried to draw his pistol, but Chell jumped the table, knocking the commodore and his chair over. There was a sharp meaty thud, then Chell got to his feet and straightened his uniform. The entire fight had taken less than ten seconds.

Harry surveyed the unconscious forms.

‘Well, that’s torn it. Sorry, sir. I feel I’m rather responsible

–’

‘The fault is mine – but these Landorans are so insufferable at times!’ He smiled wolfishly. ‘They have also become soft from flying spacecraft for too long – unlike yourself. A doctor who can use his fists...interesting. Actually I am glad to learn you’re not one of them.’

‘I suppose we’d better start working on our apologies –’

‘No, wait.’ There was an odd glint in Chell’lak’s eye. ‘Do you think my proposal to track down the enemy supply ships to their source was a good one?’

‘Seemed pretty sound to me. A brigadier I know would certainly have taken the chance. Actually I was rather surprised these chaps didn’t go for it in a bigger way.’

‘They think only of confronting the fleets of Averon in grand battles, but I must think of Jand.’ He looked at Harry, then at the recumbent Gillsen. ‘To me, of course, all you humans look much alike, but you seem to be of similar size and appearance. Could you wear his clothes?’

‘Well, I should think – oh, I say. You mean?’

‘Impersonate the commodore? Yes. Will you do it?’ Harry took a deep breath and nodded. ‘Good. Nacroth – find some rope and somewhere to put our guests where they won’t be disturbed for a while.’ He unclipped his belt communicator and began speaking urgently into it.

‘I suppose it’s one way to get promotion,’ Harry said, eyeing the commodore’s uniform as he started unbuttoning his own jacket.

Fifteen minutes later the Landoran guards on the ferry pad saluted smartly as Harry, dressed in Gillsen’s uniform with his head bent forward and hat pulled down low, strode briskly out of the roof lift past them. To provide a further distraction from his features he carried a briefcase, with his own clothes folded up inside, which he clutched importantly to his chest. Chell and Nacroth accompanied him, talking in low urgent tones to save him from speaking.

They crossed to the ramp of one of the Landoran ferries and climbed up it. The crewman at the head of the ramp was still saluting Harry as Nacroth pressed a gun into his stomach and suggested he remain

quiet. Harry and Chell went forward to the flight deck and convinced the pilot and co-pilot that they should cooperate by applying a similar line of argument.

A minute later the Landoran communications room received a message from the ferry pilot to say that he was taking Commodore Gillsen to the Jand military spacefield east of the city. The ferry was cleared and it took off immediately, the monitoring of its flight being passed over to local air traffic control.

The journey took less than five minutes and the ferry was directed to land at a pad on the edge of the field. As it touched down Harry saw a ground bus coming from the direction of a barracks-style building at high speed. The bus screeched to a halt beside the pad before the dust kicked up by the landing had settled. Some twenty-five Jand spacecrew in full kit and carrying cases of equipment and supplies disembarked, jogged across the pad and immediately boarded the ferry. The moment the last man was in, the ramp swung shut and the underjets whined into life once again. With a rush of displaced air it rose up into the sky and in a minute it had vanished from sight. The ferry pilot was induced not to communicate his new destination or flight plan and, thanks to Chell, the Jand tower controller did not attempt to contact him to correct this oversight.

The crewman on communicator watch on the destroyer *Oranos* didn't notice the slight strain in the ferry pilot's voice when he informed him he was bringing up Commodore Gillsen with a few Jand guests, and that his ETA was less than six minutes.

'But nothing was scheduled,' he protested. 'Commander Thurval's still groundside. Shall I try to contact him?'

'No,' said the ferry pilot quickly, 'this is an informal visit.

They won't expect the full VIP treatment.'

'And they won't get it,' the crewman said with feeling, and alerted Lieutenant Vane, who had the watch. Vane cursed the unscheduled visit, then mustered what crew there was to receive their guests.

They were still falling into line and straightening hats when the ferry docked alongside. The pressures equalized, the inner airlock hatch opened and figures stepped through. For a moment Vane saw what he had expected to see: namely Gillsen with three or four uniformed Jand behind him, and threw a snappy salute.

‘Welcome aboard, sir. May I –’

‘Sorry, old chap – but you’re being hijacked in a good cause,’ said the stranger wearing Commodore Gillsen’s uniform.

A host of Jand poured into the ship past him. They were not only carrying guns but pointing them in an intimidating fashion.

Eight minutes later the ferry undocked from the *Oranos* and began the long descent from orbit. It made no communication with Landor ground control, who therefore suspected communicator failure. In a sense they were right: the ferry’s communicator had been very thoroughly smashed. So the ferry’s own crew, and the still dazed complement it carried from the *Oranos*, had to wait for groundfall before they could tell their stories. But before the ferry had even touched the atmosphere, the main engines of the *Oranos* lit up and drove her out of orbit at maximum acceleration, ignoring increasingly urgent signals from the squadron flagship *Rossberg*. The *Rossberg* also contacted the Landoran base on Jand for some explanation of Commodore Gillsen’s actions, only to discover that they believed Gillsen was visiting a Jand spacefield.

Then came a transmission from the *Oranos*.

Dekkilander Chell’lak’s face filled a score of screens on and above Jand as interested parties tuned in. He seemed perfectly composed and spoke in a brisk, matter-of-fact manner. ‘I take full personal responsibility for obtaining a craft of the Landoran fleet in such an unorthodox manner, and will do my best to return it as soon as circumstances permit. I wish to state that neither the Jand high command nor any civil authority have sanctioned this action. For an explanation of my intentions I suggest you consult Commodore Gillsen. You will find him, together with three of his fellow officers, in the private washroom on the top floor of the Ministry building on First Avenue. I’m sure they will be pleased to receive visitors.

Chell’lak out.’

The *Oranos* dropped into hyperspace and vanished from the Jand system.

ay we come in, Doctor?' Director Kambril asked.

'M 'But of course,' the Doctor said graciously, and waved Kambril and Andez into his small apartment unit. He looked at Scout following on behind them. 'But not him, if you don't mind.'

Kambril shrugged equitably. 'As you wish – Scout: wait outside.' They proceeded into the main room. Now that you've been with us a few days, we thought we should check on how you are doing,' Kambril explained. 'Is everything comfortable enough for you?'

'Everybody is most concerned about my well-being,' the Doctor observed. 'I'm beginning to feel like some exotic specimen of plant that's about to flower.'

'Perhaps hospitality is important to us,' Andez said simply.

He noticed the window to the apartment's small balcony was open. A cool night breeze fluttered the curtains. 'Been looking at the stars, Doctor?'

'Yes, but they're not very clear.'

'Ah, that's the shielding.' They stepped out on to the small dark balcony. The wavering line of softly glowing cliffside windows stretched away on either side of them. The Valley floor and the test zones were invisible, but in the distance a few scattered lights from the factory service units could just be made out. Above the dark jagged rim of the Valley the stars twinkled and shimmered as though seen through a thin haze of cloud.

'A continuous perfect blackout is bad psychologically and anyway would be almost impossible to maintain at all times,'

Andez explained, 'especially outside the visible wavelengths.

Of course we'd impose one and restrict all surface activity if any intruder was detected in the system, but otherwise we rely on tuned emitters dotted all round the Valley rim. They create a sort of distorting and scattering blanket effect. Well, I'm only a soldier and I don't understand all the technicalities, but it scrambles all electromagnetic radiation passing through it –

both ways, unfortunately, hence the blurred stars. But it's worth it for

the peace of mind it gives us.'

'Yes, I can quite see how it would make you feel secure,'

agreed the Doctor.

'Were you wondering if any of them were your own?'

Kambril ventured.

The Doctor considered for a moment, then shook his head.

'Somehow I feel my home star is not visible from here.'

There was a contemplative silence, broken rather awkwardly by Andez. 'Look, Doctor, I'm sorry there's still no news of your friends. I can assure you we're staying on the alert. Best not to dwell on it, eh?'

'Our experience,' Kambril said helpfully, 'has been to occupy the mind constructively at such times. In fact I understand from Academ Tarron that you've started working on some project of your own. Is it a weapon of some sort?'

'Not as such, but you might say its application is weapons-related. I'm hoping for some interesting results.'

'Good. When will it be ready?'

'Oh, not for a few days yet.'

'Well, be sure and let us know when it's ready to test.'

'I assure you, Director, if it functions as it should you'll be the first to know.'

The next morning, Elyze Brant studied the strange device taking shape in a corner of Cara's laboratory in bemused silence. Suspended within a cubical framework of struts and clamps were emitter coils and flashing lights, crystal capacitors, sheaves of nanotronic components and circuit boards, all linked by several metres of multicoloured wiring.

'All right, Doctor,' she said at length. 'I give up – what is it?'

The Doctor withdrew his head from the innards of the construction and beamed at her. 'Putting it simply, it's a random oscillatory inversion resonator of a Canard design based on traditional

Machiavellistic principles, but also employing retro-spoofism and significant lunar radiance, together with triple Bunk-Um circuitry,' he explained, leaving her none the wiser and suspecting that he had included some archaic words from another language.

'Ah, right, yes. I'm sure it is. Well, here are those stabilizers you wanted.' She handed over a small transparent packet of plastic-encased silver beads. 'Lucky we still had some in the stores.'

'Thank you – I'm not depriving anybody else of vital equipment, am I?'

'Oh no. We can manufacture most of what we need here, and there are still sources that can supply special items, if you know where to find them.'

'Of course – you arrange the supply runs. Cara was telling me how much everybody relies on you. In fact you're a good friend of hers, aren't you?'

Elyze smiled. 'Well, we've known each other for about eighteen years.'

'Ah, you came here with Director Kambril then.'

'That's right.'

'It must have been a terrible time then – after your great loss.'

Elyze stiffened slightly. 'We did what we had to do.'

The Doctor suddenly looked concerned and sympathetic.

'I'm sorry – did you lose somebody close to you on Landor, like Cara did?'

Elyze found she could not face his pale searching eyes and turned away. 'Excuse me, Doctor,' she said sharply, 'but I'd rather not talk about it.'

And she walked quickly from the laboratory.

That evening Cara was returning from the administration department, after having finally delivered some work records they had been hounding her about for several days, when she unexpectedly came upon the Doctor. She turned the corner on to the length of otherwise blank corridor from which the conference and file room doors opened, only to see him behaving in the strangest manner.

Eyes to the ground, he was pacing along in a measured way, laying out his long scarf behind him as he went, then repeating the exercise until he had progressed down the entire corridor. Reaching the end he turned round, causing Tarron to shrink back around the corner until she watched with only half an eye. The Doctor frowned, and reeled his scarf in rapidly, only to immediately lay it across the corridor. Recovering it again, he then laid down flat on his stomach, screwed an old-fashioned type of jeweller's lens into one eye and appeared to examine the floor carpet minutely.

At this Cara could restrain herself no longer. She marched boldy round the corner and up to the Doctor. 'What are you doing?' she demanded.

The Doctor had rolled over on to his side at her approach, resting one elbow negligently on the floor and beaming innocently up at her. 'Fascinating thing: corridor-and-tunnel architecture,' he said brightly. 'I'm thinking of writing a monograph on it.'

'What?'

'The urge so many intelligent beings have to burrow, no doubt deriving from some latent streak of troglodytic ancestry.

It is amazing the number of races throughout the galaxy who indulge this passion for endless passageways, full of twists and turns and blind corners. The trouble is I seem to recall having to run up and down them all the time, and though seven hundred and forty-eight is no age, I'm not getting any younger. I mean the Daleks, Aztecs, Atlanteans, the good old London Underground, Peladon, the Minoan labyrinth of Crete

–' he suddenly sprang to his feet '– and by the way, do you know where the original construction plans for this complex are filed?'

The last question tacked on to the end of the rambling list caught her by surprise, and she replied automatically, 'Central records, I should think – what do you want to see them for?'

'Oh, purely academic reasons,' he assured her. Then added mischievously: 'for the moment.'

nternally the *Oranos* was in a sorry state.

I It had suffered no actual battle damage, but close inspection revealed half its weapons systems were underpowered or in urgent need of adjustment and tuning, its magazines were only one-fifth full and several secondary and emergency power bypass circuits were non-functional. Even its standard detector array was badly misaligned, and had to be laboriously reset before the Jand-built amplifier could be connected. Every one of the Jand replacement crew had been fully occupied with repairs and maintenance since their hasty departure, leaving many of the menial but essential domestic tasks to Harry and Chell'lak. But the old soldier did not complain, and fortunately the cooking involved prepacked meals and the automatic microwave range was, almost, foolproof.

'No wonder Gillsen didn't want you to borrow a ship if they're all in this sort of condition,' Harry said on the third day of their journey to the Nethrass system, as he and Chell cleared the general mess room after the latest exhausted group of crewmen had gone to their bunks.

'This is obviously a second-line craft,' Chell replied. 'Most likely a converted and modified merchant ship. The Landorans must be spreading their forces dangerously thin to keep the Averon Navy neutralized. Gillsen was right about their situation.' He looked at Harry uncertainly. 'Was this a foolish action? Was it motivated by bravado and injured pride rather than logic? I know the Landorans are insufferable at times, but they are our allies. I may have deprived them of a craft they could not afford to lose.'

'Don't think like that, sir,' Harry said firmly. 'If this pays off it'll save the Landorans a lot more ships in the future. And you've even given the *Oranos* a top service into the bargain.

They'll thank you for it in the end.'

'I only hope so,' Chell said heavily. 'But I wouldn't be surprised if the Landorans sent a force after us. They'd be fully entitled in the circumstances, and we could hardly resist them if they did, could we, Tramour?'

This last was spoken to his Jand ship's captain, Tramour'des, who had just entered with his latest report on the repairs.

'No, sir, but I admit my feelings towards Landorans are also mixed,'

Tramour replied after a moment's consideration.

'It's true they're often thoughtless in their dealings with other races and assume a certain superior stance at times, but what would we do without them? Perhaps they should be allowed some latitude after the price they paid for their stand against Averon.'

'The Averons really destroyed Landor completely?' Harry asked.

'And all the settlements and bases in its system,' Chell said simply.

'You mean there's nothing left at all?'

'There might as well be. The worlds remain but they are dead. If their sun had gone nova it could not have caused more destruction or greater loss of life.'

'I attended one of the Landorans' memorial ceremonies,'

Tramour'des added. 'We halted our ships on the edge of the system. We dared not risk going closer, because apart from the radiation belts there are still active vortex mines and bioweapon packages left over from the battle drifting about.

The Landorans dropped wreaths and played their anthems, I remember. It was hard not to be moved by it all. If that had happened to Jand, perhaps I'd also tend to overvalue my lost culture and be impatient with others who hadn't suffered equally. Perhaps, secretly, they envy us because we still have worlds to call home?'

Fortunately the *Oranos*'s drive was fully functional and the ship proved as fast as they had anticipated. They dropped out of hyperspace in the outskirts of the Nethrass system without any sign of pursuit from friend or foe, activated the newly amplified detector and began their search for a suitable target.

They only had to wait a few hours.

'Averon fast freighter located heading out of system,' the operator monitoring the detector reported excitedly.

His call brought Chell to the bridge with Harry close behind him. Tramour'des flashed a look of triumph at them.

'The integrated system is working perfectly, sir. We're well outside their own detector range yet registering them perfectly.'

‘Don’t get any closer than twice the standard range,’ Chell said. ‘Are you ready for their transition into hyperspace?’

‘The tracking is on automatic, sir. It will engage our drive and set us on an approximate departure vector as soon as they jump. We shan’t lose them.’

‘Sorry, but I don’t know much about this sort of thing,’

Harry said. ‘Why don’t they just pop into hyperspace as soon as they leave a planet?’

‘It’s a matter of the gravitational gradient,’ Tramour’des explained. ‘It takes more power to jump the closer you are to a massive body. It’s also safer to make the transition in open space.’

‘Safer? What sort of things can go wrong, then?’ Harry asked uneasily.

‘Leaving half your craft behind in normal space, emerging in the middle of a sun, that sort of thing,’ Tramour’des said casually. ‘Ah, there they go!’

The trace of the enemy craft had blurred and changed colour. The scale grid on the screen shrank to keep the other craft within its field as its velocity increased in a quantum leap. Harry felt a slight dropping sensation and a moment of nausea. The stars beyond the bridge portals blurred and stretched and they were in hyperspace, travelling at many times the speed of light and apparently still intact. After a few moments he asked, ‘Any idea of where it’s headed?’

‘Not yet. We shall need to track it for a little longer before we can start making any guesses.’

The detector monitor said sharply, ‘Sir, eight craft are entering hyperspace behind us. They register as Averonian Varcon mark 4 pursuit fighters, and they are closing on the freighter.’

‘It had an escort,’ Tramour’des said angrily. ‘We can’t risk being caught between them – adjust to a parallel course.’

‘Eight more contacts approaching from ahead, wide formation. A second flight of Varcons: their formation is opening out, and so is the first flight.’

‘Surely they can’t detect us at this range?’ Chell asked.

‘No, but they think something must be here, or else we’ve been unlucky enough to be caught in the middle of an exercise,’ Tramour said. ‘Maximum drive away from present course, any bearing. We can’t risk being englobed.’

‘Both flights are speeding up. Their detector fields will be touching soon.’

‘Can we get out before they close the lid?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Can’t we drop back into normal space?’ Chell asked.

‘They’d detect the discontinuity ripple at this range even on their equipment and follow us. We have to get clear before we can drop out undetected. Battle stations – ready weapons.

We’ll have to make a hole for ourselves.’

Harry licked his lips as his mouth suddenly seemed very dry. ‘Anything I can do?’

‘Prepare for casualties,’ said Chell tersely.

‘Commander,’ the monitor said, ‘another object approaching on tangential course. Closing fast.’

‘Another fighter?’

‘No. Configuration unknown. A large ship, velocity mark seventeen and accelerating. It’s heading straight for the fighters.’

On the screen they saw the new point of light pass through the first wall of ships. Half of them held their positions, the others altered course to pursue the stranger.

‘It’ll pass us at the limit of visual range,’ the monitor announced.

‘Display it,’ Tramour ordered.

A magnified image appeared on a second screen. For a moment they saw four sleek black bat-winged forms tearing after a ship whose improbable sculpted golden lines gleamed and sparkled. Explosions burst in its wake and beams of light stabbed about it, but it bobbed and wove from side to side unscathed, as though teasing its pursuers.

Harry shivered and clasped the edge of a console for support as a wave of inexplicable foreboding washed over him.

Then the darting and dodging ships were out of visual range and heading towards the oncoming flight of fighters, some of which were already breaking off to intercept the unknown craft. The *Oranos*'s instruments recorded the energy pulses of multiple gunfire, but again the golden ship evaded the beams and projectiles with contemptuous ease. Then it was through the screen with half the fighters trailing after it and the rest scattered in disarray.

'The formation has broken up, sir – plenty of holes now,'

the monitor reported with evident relief.

'Now we can drop back into normal space,' Chell breathed.

'No. Reduce speed and alter course.' Tramour gave the pilot a string of figures. 'We'll sidestep the remains of the second fighter screen and fly an arc that'll take us back to intersect the freighter's projected course. There's a good chance we can pick it up again and follow at extreme range.

You'll have your prize yet, sir,' he told Chell.

Chell grinned in satisfaction. 'Well done, Tramour.' He glanced around at Harry and gave a start. Harry was still clutching the edge of the console and looking desperately pale.

'What's wrong?'

Harry could only shake his head slowly for a moment as he tried to regain his composure. He knew he was a straightforward, solid, perhaps rather unimaginative sort, but he'd certainly never felt anything like this before. He took a deep breath and said shakily, 'When that gold ship went past us, I swear it felt as though somebody had just walked over my grave!'

13

Escape

arah awoke into bedlam.

S The dormitory was full of crying, shouting and screaming, while outside glass shattered, metal groaned and fire crackled. Her bunk shook as somebody barged into it and she looked about wildly, trying to make sense of what was happening. The blackness was only broken by pale glow strips along the aisles between the bunks. By their dim radiance she made out a wild throng of figures filling the space, stumbling over toppled bunks and their fallen fellows. A crowd was surging about the chamber's two doorways, and she could hear a hollow crash and thud as some heavy object was swung to and fro in a frantic attempt to break them down. And suddenly she understood their panic: she could smell burning.

She threw back her blanket, but a hand touched her arm and 829 climbed on to the bunk, shouting above the commotion:

'Hold it, Seventy-three. Get dressed and let them get a door open first.'

Lying on her bunk, Sarah wriggled into her outer clothes and pulled on her boots. As she was fastening them there came a final triumphant crash and one pair of doors burst open, letting a shaft of light from the hallway beyond into the dormitory. The group at the second door abandoned their efforts and joined the rest in a mad scramble for the exit. Sarah and 829 let the living tide flow about them until the dormitory was empty, except for a couple of frightened sobbing voices somewhere in the gloom. Sarah took a step towards them, but 829 held her back.

'We can't just leave them,' Sarah protested.

'We must. We haven't a chance if we carry passengers,'

829 said harshly, and Sarah knew she was right.

They made their way cautiously past the ablutions and the general hall, and peered out through its broken doors across the compound. The hard night stars were washed out by the pole-mounted worklights and the yellow flicker of a dozen fires, sending the grotesquely elongated shadows of running figures dancing over the hard packed earth and across the sides of the assembly sheds. A distant metallic twang and crash told of a fence being torn down, and from all around came a medley of shouts and oaths, mingled with amplified voices of the synthoid guards calling for order and the hiss and crackle of their guns.

'What's happened?' Sarah wondered. 'Why haven't they used the ident plates to stop all this?'

They edged along to the corner of the building and looked towards the control domes. The camp's skyline had altered radically. Stars shone where the towering skeletal form of the central pylon should have been. Its tangled wreckage now lay over two of the domes. It had been brought down, but how?

Then she noticed a large hole in the fence between them and the central compound, on a clear line to the base of the pylon.

Straining her eyes, Sarah could just make out the remains of a couple of flatbed trucks crumpled about the twisted stump of one of the pylon's support legs. Somebody on the night shift had obviously been using the trucks, but how had they managed to drive them through the inner compound fence?

The ident plates would have been triggered as soon as they entered, even if the guards had not stopped them. Then she realized they had lashed a couple of trucks together, locked the steering, pointed them in the right direction and left them to go on their way unmanned. How ridiculously simple.

'They did it,' 829 said disbelievingly. 'No communications with Averon, no long-range control of the guards, no override cutouts on vehicles – no ident signal!'

They looked at each other, the true significance of the fall of the tower beginning to dawn even as the firelight glittered off the plates on their foreheads.

'You mean – it's safe to take these things off?' Sarah said slowly. 'Won't they still trigger automatically?'

'We won't know unless we try – we'll need tools.'

'First we'll need food and water – if we're going to have a chance out there.'

829 grinned at her. 'You're learning, Seventy-three.'

In a crouching run they made their way back around the living quarters block and inside to the empty kitchens. Raw dried food mixes were tipped out of airtight storage cartons and replaced with spongy grey bread and hunks of waxy pink pseudo-cheese. Two small urns which were used to carry water round to workers on particularly hot days were filled to the brim and their lids firmly screwed shut. These provisions were bundled into blankets recovered from the dormitory,

with extra covers for themselves as protection against the night cold. Broken lengths of lightweight angle trim from around the shattered doors were pushed through the tied corners of their bundles, allowing them to be slung over their shoulders in traditional style.

Then they crept back out into the confusion of the night, which had not diminished. Hundreds of prisoners must have simply scattered over the lava plain or along the foot of the escarpment, but others seemed to have chosen to stand and fight.

Sarah and 829 edged along the wall, hugging shadows, until they could look across through a dividing fence to the first of the assembly buildings. The fence was split by a ragged hole, with half a dozen bodies scattered around it, either stunned or dead; they could not tell. A synthoid guard was standing over them, swinging its head around, its red eyes glowing. They froze, hardly daring to breathe. Please move, Sarah thought. Then there was a commotion from somewhere out of their line of sight and a small forklift type loader appeared, motor whirring furiously, and headed straight for the guard. The synthoid raised its gun arm and fired twice in rapid succession, eye searing bolts of blue-white fire blasting gouges in the forward frame of the truck. The driver screamed but held his course. There was a crash as the two met, the impact knocking the synthoid off its feet on to its back. The loader swerved, heeled over and fell on top of the synthoid.

The robot's legs and arms could be seen writhing about under the loader for a moment, then it found a grip and began to push the vehicle aside. The driver, who had been flung clear by the impact, picked himself up holding one arm awkwardly, and gaped at the struggling machine. A voice called out to him and he stumbled away out of sight.

'Now!' hissed 829, and sprinted for the gap in the fence.

Sarah followed. They pushed their way through, ignoring the sharp ends that scratched and tore their clothes, pelted across the momentarily deserted stretch of ground on the other side and into an open door of the assembly shed.

It was strange to see the great space empty of workers.

Evidently the night shift had abandoned it as soon as the confusion had begun, leaving machinery still whirring and humming mindlessly. But a few had evidently paused in their flight long enough to make a parting gesture: the glittering remains of the shed's visi screen

crunched under their feet.

Baal would not be looking down on his workers through that ever again.

829 searched through the items scattered across a workbench until she found what she was after. A wide-jawed adjustable wrench with a long handle. She knelt down and held it out to Sarah. ‘Do it.’

‘Can’t we find a hacksaw or something and cut through?’

‘No time, and we mustn’t leave pin ends or anything inside us.’

Tight-lipped, Sarah adjusted the wrench until the tips of its jaws were closed firmly on the edges of 829’s ident plate so that the handle of the wrench was projecting upward. She found a bit of rag and doubled it up between the wrench shaft and the top of 829’s head, giving the tool a fulcrum to turn about. Then she stood behind 829 so that she could brace herself with her free hand against the back of 829’s head. She took a deep breath and pulled the wrench handle sharply backwards. 829 gave a gasp of pain as the pins tore out of her skull bone and the plate came free. 829 clutched her forehead and slumped forward.

‘Are you all right?’ Sarah asked in horror.

Slowly 829 straightened and let her hands fall aside. There was a red weal on her hairline where the lip of the wrench jaw had pressed through the rag. Below this was an oval patch of very pale grime-ringed skin, inside of which were two pinholes with a drop of blood oozing from each. 829 looked at the plate still held in the jaws of the wrench and then into Sarah’s concerned eyes. ‘My name,’ she said simply, ‘is Angelyn Marcavos.’

Sarah hugged her for a moment in relief and delight, then, knowing they had no time to waste, steeled herself to hand over the wrench and rag and kneel down. Angelyn fitted them carefully in place as Sarah had done, braced herself and pulled. Sarah cried out as an agonizing tearing pressure seemed about to split her skull apart. Then it was gone and there was just a dull throb. She wiped her hand across her forehead. It came away streaked in blood and she smiled shakily. She picked up her pack, but Angelyn was rummaging amongst the stacks of fittings. In a moment she had uncovered two sheets of plasticized foil composite. It was matt black on one side and reflective on the other. She gave one sheet to Sarah.

‘It might help protect us from the guard’s thermal scanners.’

They shouldered their packs and left the shed, working their way along towards the nearest break in the outer perimeter fence. Fires still burnt and there came the occasional crackle of electric fence wires shorting out, but overall the noise was abating as the resistance in the camp collapsed.

They ducked as flying discs skimmed overhead and headed out across the lava plain. If only we could get hold of one of those, Sarah thought wistfully. They could hear concentrated firing in the distance, as though a pitched battle was being fought.

‘The landing field,’ said Angelyn. ‘They must be trying to take a ship.’

‘Maybe we should join them.’

‘They won’t make it. The synths are too good. Our best hope is still the highlands.’

‘There’s not much up there.’

‘You said there were plants and water. That means it’s possible to survive.’

They reached the corner of the shed nearest the perimeter wire almost opposite the landing ground. A large swathe of fence had been knocked down, presumably by a commandeered vehicle. The still forms of three prisoners lay just outside. The gap was perhaps fifteen yards away, Sarah estimated, then there was over a quarter of a mile of open ground before the base of the escarpment and the first proper cover. How fast could they run the distance carrying their packs? If they were caught in the open that was the end of it.

But what was the alternative?

Angelyn looked around the corner, but all was clear. She turned back to face Sarah. ‘Ready?’

‘Yes.’

‘Don’t stop to check those three, because –’

‘I know.’

They ran forward, Angelyn in the lead. The heavy gauge mesh of the fence bounced and sprang under their feet, then they had leaped clear

of it on to soft sand. A thin cutting noose suddenly seemed to tighten about Sarah's left ankle as she brought her leg forward and she sprawled on her face beside the other fallen bodies, her pack thudding into her back, winding her. Hearing her grunt of pain and surprise Angelyn turned round. Looking dazedly up from the ground, Sarah saw her face clearly in the light reflected from the globe of Averon.

She looked at Sarah, then at the hills, and hesitated. There was a rush of air, a light stabbed down out of the sky and caught Angelyn starkly in the centre of its beam. Behind its dazzling source Sarah could just make out a flying disc.

'Return to your assigned quarters,' the synthoid's toneless voice boomed down. 'You will be punished for removing your ident plate. What is your number?'

She saw Angelyn sway slightly as though she were going to collapse. Then she straightened and said clearly, 'My name is Angelyn Marcavos.'

'What is your number?'

'My name is Angelyn Marcavos and I am free to go where I please!' And she began to walk determinedly towards the escarpment. A synthoid gun crackled and Angelyn was haloed in blue fire. She jerked and swayed, but somehow remained standing. A second bolt lashed out and she collapsed in a twisted heap and lay still. The disc banked and swooped away, continuing its patrol of the perimeter. Only then did Sarah realize the synthoids had taken her for one of the bodies that had already fallen by the fence.

She untangled the loop of wire that had tripped her from around her ankle, and crawled over to Angelyn. She was so still she could not be sure whether she was alive or dead. And either way, by Angelyn's own hard rules, she knew she would have to leave her. 'I promise I won't forget your name,' she whispered.

Then Sarah heard a distant humming and scrambled back through the fence, just reaching the shadows of the shed wall before the flying disc appeared once again. She pulled the thermal foil blanket over her and watched it pass with dismay, realizing how quickly it had made the circuit. Perhaps there were two of them? In either case there was no way she could reach the base of the escarpment before it returned again.

Would her blanket provide sufficient protection out in the open?

She slumped back against the wall, suddenly feeling very tired. It was only a matter of time before they found her.

They'd been fools to think they could escape. Already the sound of fighting from the landing ground had diminished, and no ship had taken off with its triumphant crew of escapees.

The ident plates would be replaced and order restored.

Punishments would be meticulously dealt out, the damage would be repaired, and she would be back in the same old routine of fetching and carrying as though nothing had happened.

The same old routine. Why did she feel that was significant?

Think, Smith, think! she told herself You don't give up, ever! Just because the Doctor's not here to work it out for you.

Then she had it.

Shouldering her pack again she dashed back the way she had come, back to the centre of the base, hopefully ahead of the closing net. A few of the older prisoners were wandering about the compounds still wearing their ident plates. They looked at her anxiously, some even asking her what they should do. Feeling sickened she ignored them, wondering if they had actually become so used to taking orders that they could no longer think for themselves.

Back in the assembly shed she found what she wanted: a reel of transparent tape, an adjustable short-bladed cutter used to open packing cases, a portable power tool and a length of flexible tubing. Then she headed for the junk room. If only the guards remained occupied elsewhere for another few minutes she had a chance.

As she expected, the small shed's sliding door was open and the lights were on, presumably just as the synth on duty had left it when the trouble started. A few pieces of salvage lay on the floor where they had been dropped by their porters, but otherwise the interior was unoccupied.

Just inside the door was a pile of discarded parts the synths had sorted under guidance from Averon. In the middle of the shed was a stack of mesh panels to rest the parts on and a plastic sheet wrapping and heat sealing machine, while along the far end, furthest from the door, was a neat stack of sealed and labelled parts ready for shipment out. It was to this she ran. Was it still there? She remembered vaguely noting it

the day before. Yes. It was an almost complete synthoid warrior, laid out on its mesh panel like a bizarre stretcher case, scarred and blackened with a missing right arm and lower legs disconnected at the knee joints. It was wrapped in a plastic sheet, and bore a label containing details of what combat zone it had been recovered from.

She pulled out her knife and carefully cut the heavy duty plastic along its top seam and pulled it back, exposing the remains. Ears straining all the time for the guards, she set to work, not daring to close the shed door, but relying on the intervening bulk of the wrapping machine to conceal her from chance discovery and the shed's very openness and bright illumination to discourage any closer inspection. It took fifteen minutes of frantic work with the powered multi-socket wrench, which was almost as effective as the Doctor's sonic screwdriver, to unbolt the head, torso and leg outer panels from the inner frame, actuator units and other connections, and dump these in the discard pile. She heard feet tramp past several times but nobody disturbed her.

Into the now hollow thighs of the body shell she packed her food, while the deep broad torso and helmetlike head she padded out with blankets, leaving space to curl up inside, though it would be cramped even for her slim figure. She scrambled into the lower body half, resting the top chest panel half across her knees, and drew the plastic bag up around her.

When the sheet ends met over the top end of the mesh panel, she doubled them in and taped them together. She pulled a fold of plastic across the severed arm socket, cut a small hole and taped the mouth of the flexible tube she had brought with her inconspicuously to it so it was flush with the plastic. She wriggled down and pulled the chest panel over her until it slid into place. Enough light filtered through the helmet visor to let her dimly see what she was doing. More tape applied from within fastened the two halves together. She put the tube from the arm socket in her mouth and began to breathe through it.

She tried to lie still. For better or worse she was committed.

If it didn't work and she was discovered she would be no worse off than before, she told herself. But how long could she wait? Her supply of food and water would last about a week with care, but she could hardly stay concealed continuously for that long. It all depended on how quickly the guards restored order and routine. She realized how tiring breathing through the tube was. A reaction to her exertions had set in, and she began to feel drowsy. No, she thought vaguely, it's not

possible to fall asleep now.

In two minutes she had done just that.

A bumping swaying motion and muffled voices woke her.

For a moment she felt terribly cramped and confused. The breathing tube lay half out of her mouth, sticking to her lower lip. There were more bumps and thuds around her, then a synth voice giving a command to depart. A motor whined and she felt herself moving. Bright daylight shone through the visor and for several minutes she was driven along at a steady speed. It had to be the road out across the lava flats to the landing ground. She knew the guards would not delay a scheduled shipment any longer than they had to. The old routine.

The truck halted, and there were more voices and the sounds of other items of salvage being unloaded. Then it was her turn. She was placed on some hard surface, a hydraulic mechanism hummed, and there was the sensation of rising.

More hands lifted the pallet holding the dismembered synthoid. The light through the visor dimmed, more jolts, a grating sound, and then she was set down.

She was inside the hold of one of the freighters.

Footsteps and voices rang out as other packages were set down close by her. Then the human footsteps retreated, and there was just the mechanical tread of a synthoid on metal deckplates. She held her breath. Was it checking to see all the workers had left the hold? What if it used some exotic sense that penetrated her purloined body shell? Surely it didn't need to look hard to see the hold was empty. All the workers must have had their ident plates restored and they could track them directly. The heavy steps clumped away and she breathed again. There was a whine and thud of a hatch closing, and latches clicked into place. The distant sounds of the crew moving about and the closing of other hatches reverberated through the body of the ship for several minutes.

Then she became aware of a steadily growing purr from somewhere under the deck as the motors were started. It rose rapidly to a pulsing heavy drone. There was a slight swaying and then a sensation of smooth acceleration with hardly any discomfort. Air shrilled past the hull for a minute then faded gradually away. The motor noise diminished to a purr once more, accompanied only by the muted

hums and whirrs of the ship's internal systems.

She was in space.

Cautiously she broke open the chest plate, reached up with her cutter, slit open the top seam of the plastic bag and pulled it down far enough to allow her to wriggle out of her hiding-place. The hold was not quite dark. From one corner came a faint blue radiance, but its source was hidden behind a jumble of large cartons and the sacks of plastic-wrapped salvage.

There seemed to be more of this than she had seen in the junk room, so presumably the ship must have already had some on board when it landed.

Painfully she struggled upright, massaging her cramped muscles. The deck seemed firm under her feet, so the ship was either under constant drive or it had artificial gravity like Nerva Beacon. The question was, how long would it take to reach Averon, or wherever it was bound? Hours if not days; still, she would have to move sometime. Clutching the powered socket tool like a club, she made for the blue light, which she could now see was a strip lamp set over an internal hatch. Just as long as it wasn't locked. But then why should it be –

In the gloom her elbow struck one of the stacked cartons. It was light and shifted slightly. Fearful of making a noise she grabbed at it, but only succeeded in tripping over an unseen object on the deck and falling awkwardly, striking a hard, plastic-wrapped form as she did so.

She heard the distinct splutter of electric sparks.

Inches from her face a plastic sheet was suddenly illuminated from within by a flickering red glow. With a gasp of alarm she tried to scramble away, but there was a grinding whirr and the sound of tearing plastic as a large cold mechanical hand reached out and closed about her arm like a vice.

14

The Guardians of Averon

t is as I feared,' said Chell heavily. 'This is the Averon I syste

‘I m.’

Harry was surprised at the palpable sense of despondency that descended upon the crew after Chell’s announcement. The *Oranos* had successfully regained contact with the freighter, and had trailed it discreetly for another day before it dropped out of hyperspace. Neither the Averon fighters nor the golden ship had appeared again, much to Harry’s relief They had followed the freighter back to normal space, where the screens showed the tiny but brilliant disc of a sun. Star sights and rapid calculations confirmed their location.

‘I thought you knew the Nethrass’s weapons would ultimately come from Averon,’ Harry said.

‘But I hoped the freighter might rendezvous at some transfer point along the way first, but I was wrong,’ Chell admitted. ‘It ends here. We cannot go any deeper into this system. And if Averon is now escorting its ships in strength, then they cannot simply be intercepted in transit.’ The old soldier suddenly looked weary. ‘It has all been a foolish waste of time, and I have grossly offended Landor in the process.’

‘Now come on, sir,’ Harry protested. ‘I know this is the enemy stronghold and all that, but with this new detector of yours performing so splendidly why can’t we slip in and –’

‘Because our detector no longer gives us any advantage inside the Averon system. Almost anywhere else but not here.

But I keep forgetting you do not truly understand what we are up against.’ He turned to the detector monitor. ‘Is the secondary coupling complete?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Then locate one of the fortresses and display it.’

Harry knew the Jand technicians had been working on combining their enhanced detector with the ship’s existing telescopic viewing system to produce images synthesized from the two. The screen displaying the results of this hybrid now came to life. For a few moments star trails blurred and shimmered as it tracked about. Then it focused on a crescent-lit object that Harry first took to be a small globular planetoid.

Then he blinked and looked closer.

‘A guardian fortress of Averon,’ Chell said solemnly.

It was spherical in form and clearly an artificial structure.

Its surface was patterned with what he had at first taken to be a curiously regular arrangement of craters and mountains, but which, as the image enlarged, he now saw were structural ribs and the open muzzles of energy cannon and missile silos of massive diameter. Also arrayed across the surface were coloured beacons that pulsed every few seconds like aircraft navigation lights, and he saw in the shadowed portion of the fortress clusters of glowing pinpoints. Were they windows or portholes radiating so brazenly into space? A sense of scale asserted itself. The fortress was at least a mile across. There was no attempt to disguise it as anything other than what it was: a blatant display of raw power and absolute confidence in its own strength and invulnerability.

‘There are thousands of them orbiting the inner system,’

Tramour’des explained. ‘They are stationed just inside the point at which the gravity wells of the sun and inner planets force craft to emerge from hyperspace. The fortresses’

detector fields overlap so there is no chance of slipping between them, and it would take a fleet to overcome even one of them. Fortunately they are too massive to be driven through hyperspace by any reasonable expenditure of energy, or else Averon would have conquered the cluster long ago.’

‘But the work involved in building them! It must have been the dickens of a job,’ Harry exclaimed.

‘They had a powerful inducement,’ Chell pointed out.

‘After destroying Landor, the Averonians withdrew to their own system and reinforced its defences to prevent any reprisal in kind by the survivors of the Landoran Navy – as was very likely in those early days after the loss. Perhaps some good has come from the tragedy, though. No Allied or Union world has ever used weapons of mass destruction on such a scale again, and Averon’s direct participation in the war was reduced to fleet actions which the Landorans do their best to counter. In fact their influence over the rest of the Union after the destruction of Landor waned, allowing us to regroup and regain some losses as they became more isolated behind their shield. It is rumoured that now even their closest allies are only occasionally permitted to visit Averon itself.’ Chell looked at the image of the

fortress on the screen again and shook his head.

Harry looked about the bridge and saw resigned expressions and drooping heads. He had come to admire the Jand's courage and determination, and it was alarming to see them so thoroughly overawed and reduced to apparent impotence by the sight of one Averonian fortress, impressive as it was.

'Now this won't do,' he said briskly. 'I'm sure you've cracked tougher nuts than this before. We need some sort of trick or diversion. For instance: why not hijack one of their freighters before it gets here and sneak through in that? If these Averonians have been hiding behind their fortresses for all these years as you say, maybe they've got a bit slack and won't be as alert as they should be.'

Chell looked at him and gave a wolfish Jand smile. 'You do not lack courage, Harry'sullivan, but you still do not understand the terrible risk we would be running. No one has attempted to attack the Averon system itself in all these years, not simply because of the strength of its defences, but for fear Averon would be goaded into doing to their world what they did to Landor. That is why only the Landorans dare oppose Averon directly – they have nothing more to lose, and their few bases are scattered and secret. Any open assault on Averon must be final and complete, allowing no chance for retribution. Or else our intrusion must be totally anonymous.

Can you guarantee that? Remember: Jand may be forfeit if we fail.'

Harry felt chastened but still optimistic. 'No, sir, I cannot guarantee anything, and I quite understand your reservations.

All the same, there must be some way of putting a spanner in their works! At least let's have a look round first. Maybe there's a weak spot in their defences somewhere?'

Chell gave the Jand equivalent of a shrug, and Tramour gave the orders for a course to be set.

For ten hours they circled the inner Averon system, even making short hops through hyperspace to take them out of the system's ecliptic plane and crossing over its zenith and nadir.

Everywhere it was the same: an unbroken sphere of serenely glowing fortresses, with no gap between their widespread detector fields. Harry marvelled at the combined mass of the structures. What a tonnage of worked metal. And who manned and serviced them:

Averonians or their battle machines? Either way it was a staggering undertaking.

And then, when even Harry was beginning to feel despondent, the detector monitor called to Tramour, 'Sir, a freighter is leaving the inner system and about to pass through the fortress shield.'

'Any danger of it passing close to us?'

'No, sir, but there is something odd about it. From its acceleration it must be running nearly empty, and look at its projected bearing.'

Tramour bent over the displays and studied them for a moment, then turned to Chell. 'It's making for the edge of the cluster, but there's nothing out there – no Union or Alliance bases that we know of, at least. It might intend to alter course once it's in hyperspace I suppose, but I don't see any reason for its present course not being some indication of its ultimate destination.'

'Unless they suspect our presence and are taking precautions against us following by planning a deliberately misleading course?' Chell speculated.

'In which case the outer system would be thick with interceptor patrols, and at the moment we can detect none,'

Tramour said. 'They can't have any reason to think we're here, especially with Averon's reputation. I'll wager those fighters we encountered in hyperspace never got close enough to detect us, or even if they did, they couldn't know we'd be able to pick up the freighter's trail again. In any case, why is an empty ship leaving the system?'

Harry suddenly snapped his fingers. 'Raw materials! What if the war and building those fortresses has used up all their stocks of something vital to them here, and they need to ship in more.'

Tramour nodded. 'It is possible.'

Chell brightened visibly. 'And if we could discover the source and deny it to them...'

Everybody on the bridge was suddenly looking alert and purposeful once more. Tramour turned to the pilot. 'Alter course to shadow that freighter.'

15

Pentatholene

eepcity's central hall seated three thousand people. That Devening every one of those seats was occupied, and anybody who couldn't attend was watching the live relay on screens throughout the complex. Cara was seated on one end of the front row, beside the Doctor, along with the other heads of staff and senior military personnel. As they waited for the last few people with assigned places to arrive, Cara became aware of the Doctor twisting about in his seat and looking at the assembly with keen interest.

'It's a strange feeling, isn't it,' she said, 'to have so many people together in one place? Oh, of course, this probably isn't much of a crowd for you. It wouldn't have been for me either a few years ago, but we've had to get used to a smaller scale of things here.'

'Everybody seems very keen,' the Doctor observed, sitting straight at last. 'Is this man any good? Any juggling or card tricks? I'm rather fond of a little prestidigitation myself.'

'Doctor!' she hissed in an embarrassed undertone. 'Can't you be serious just for once?'

'Oh, I can be very serious when it's appropriate.'

'Well, it's appropriate now – shhh.'

Kambril had mounted the stage and turned to address the audience.

'Friends, fellow workers. We are here to welcome again one of Deepcity's most distinguished guests, whose sadly all too infrequent visits do so much to lift our spirits and remind us of the true meaning of the great struggle in which we are all engaged. Without further ado, I have the honour to present Fleet Admiral Zeff Dorling of the Landoran spaceforce.'

The wiry, grey-haired figure in his immaculate midnight-black uniform stepped forward from the shadows at the back of the stage, moving with distinctive military precision in his stride, despite his right arm being confined in a sling. He saluted the audience, shook hands with Kambril who then stepped down from the stage, and

patiently waited for the applause to die. When the expectant silence had grown intense enough to hear the faintest scrape of shoes, he spoke in a clear robust voice tinged with restrained emotion.

'People of Deepcity, friends, fellow Landorans. As you can see, I have been getting rather closer to the action than is good for me of late –' he lifted his constrained right arm slightly, provoking some good-natured sympathetic laughter '– and the medics suggested I should postpone my official duties for a while. But I told them nothing was going to stop me from visiting Deepcity as I promised.'

He paused while a scattering of spontaneous applause died down.

'It is always such an honour and pleasure for me to visit this remarkable facility of yours. I always feel that I am at the powerhouse, no, the very *heart* of the struggle when I am here.

In fact, if it wasn't for the work you do it is safe to say there would be no more struggle.'

More applause, bringing a gentle smile and nod from Dorling.

'You know, looking down from space gives one a remarkable perspective on things. To see a world hanging in the void, green and blue and white, makes you realize what a precious and wonderful thing it is. But sometimes, for a soldier, the view is less pleasant. When you see the landscape below blackened by the smoke of many battlefields, for instance. At such times, I admit to you, I have come close to weeping in despair. And yet there is always hope, and I remind myself that I have also seen that darkness turned back as the forces of the Alliance push forward, carrying the clear fresh air of peace and freedom in their wake. At such times it makes me proud to know that at the head of that advance are the devices you make here. They may be relatively few in number, compared to the great armies of our brave allies, but make no mistake about it: the weapons of Deepcity form the spearhead of the Alliance on a hundred worlds.'

There was prolonged applause. Cara could feel the tide of intertwined pride and anger rising about her. Dorling had to raise his hand for silence.

'It is often said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Well, Averon has been flattering you for years. They have nothing like this concentration of creative ingenuity to call upon, so their scientists have to steal your ideas from the battlefield. But I have absolute confidence that you will always stay that one crucial step ahead, and

that one day – and may it be soon – you will make a breakthrough they cannot equal. And then this terrible war will finally end in the only conceivable way: the way justice demands for the unpardonable crime they committed against us – with our victory and death to Averon!'

And the audience was on its feet, repeating the ritual chant and waving their fists. 'Death to Averon! Death to Averon!'

In the midst of the wild surge of emotion, as she wiped the tears from her eyes, it impinged on Cara that she was standing next to the only silent figure in the hall. The Doctor was not shouting or punching the air with his fists, but applauding slowly, almost mechanically. And all the time his pale penetrating gaze was fixed on Admiral Dorling.

Afterwards there was a more informal reception where Dorling could meet the senior staff. Cara was within earshot when Kambril made the introductions. 'Admiral, I'd like you to meet a new member of our team. This is the Doctor.'

Dorling gave a firm handshake with his uninjured hand and listened attentively while Kambril recounted the story of the Doctor's arrival in Deepcity. At the conclusion Dorling chuckled heartily. 'Well now, Doctor, you're quite the man of mystery it seems. Must be damnably awkward for you not remembering where you come from and all that. I hope it comes back to you soon. Still, I'm sure you're being well looked after.'

'I am being taken care of most thoroughly,' the Doctor said. 'Far beyond my expectations, in fact. Such consideration.

Even being allowed to join your gathering earlier, though I am an outsider. Well, what can I say?'

Dorling was slightly taken back by this effusive praise and the Doctor's peculiarly intense manner and stuttered for a moment. 'Er, quite...what indeed...just so.' A large man in a naval lieutenant's uniform loomed at his side and Dorling glanced round at him suddenly. 'Ah, I see I'm needed elsewhere. Well, so glad to have met you, Doctor.'

'Not half as glad as I have been to meet you, Admiral,' the Doctor informed him with solemn sincerity.

It was only after they had left the reception and were walking down a temporarily deserted stretch of corridor, that Cara had the chance to

ask the Doctor about something that had been bothering her.

‘Doctor, I couldn’t help noticing in the hall that you seemed, well, aloof and untouched by it all. I know it’s not your war or your planet that was lost, but I was still slightly surprised.’

‘I didn’t mean to offend you,’ he said with genuine concern. ‘I really wouldn’t want to do that.’

‘No, it’s just that it seemed hard to believe that you couldn’t empathize with us and respond a little more, well, enthusiastically. Unless your people don’t like showing strong emotions in public?’

‘Oh, they do –’ he looked down at her compassionately ‘–

but only when the emotions come from within ourselves.’

Dorling woke to find a firm hand pressed over his mouth and the Doctor’s disconcertingly friendly voice speaking softly in his ear. ‘Excuse the intrusion, Admiral, but I wanted a private talk with you away from all those advisers and bodyguards.

Now if I take my hand away you won’t make a lot of noise, will you? Don’t bother to call for your companions in the next room, because they couldn’t hear you anyway.’

Dorling nodded and the Doctor removed his hand, allowing him to sit up. The bedside light came on dimly until the room was half lit revealing the Doctor’s shadowy form, and teeth flashed for a moment as he grinned.

‘What have you done to them?’ Dorling asked.

‘Nothing drastic.’ The Doctor held up a silver rod with a small conical mounting at one end. ‘I merely played some soporific sonic frequencies over them to ensure they’ll sleep very soundly for the next hour or so. I’d hate our little chat to be interrupted, because there are so many things to discuss, don’t you agree? Ships and shoes and sealing wax, cabbages and – why your hair has changed colour or how your arm has healed so quickly, “Admiral Dorling”. What’s your real name, by the way?’

‘Oh.’ With an effort he dropped out of character. ‘You appear to have penetrated our little deception, my good sir.

Well, there’s no point in denying it then. I am Malf – Olivor Malf. I

don't suppose you've ever heard of me?' he added hopefully.

'I'm afraid not. Should I have done?'

'I am an actor, once of some renown.'

'Ah. Like those two in the other room?'

'Hevist and Selto?' Malf exclaimed indignantly, forgetting his situation for a moment. 'Nothing more than mediocre walk-ons, Doctor: second spear carriers. They look good in uniform, that's all. And they handle the transportation, of course . Malf ran down. 'Well, actually, they are by way of being my minders.'

'And how did they get to be your minders – and how did you get to be a pseudo admiral?'

'It's quite official, Doctor, I assure you. Not a role I would have chosen for myself but times are hard, what with the war and living on a colony world that has suffered its fair share of Averon raids. One must take what engagements one can. Not like the old days. Would you like to see my cuttings? I get so little chance to show them to strangers, as you can imagine.'

He scrambled out of bed before the Doctor could reply and pulled a case out of the bottom of the wardrobe. 'Hevist and Selto say I should leave them in the ship, but why should I?'

The bag had a coded thumblock. Inside was a bulging book of press cuttings and a vidi file, together with four lifelike wig heads, each faithfully reproducing Malf's features made up for different parts. Malf thrust the book at the Doctor and proudly held up each head for him to admire. 'My greatest roles, Doctor. Henry the Fifth, Naunton Smarg, Dulcio, and of course, Mr Levermann. As you can see, I use his hair for Dorling. Do you know in that part I had to –'

'I am more interested in your current role,' the Doctor reminded him.

Malf sighed and reluctantly put the heads away again. 'It's very simple. Fleet Command on Calfon colony – that's my homeworld – wanted to boost morale by having senior officers travel around to bases and Alliance worlds giving stirring speeches and so forth. But, apart from security considerations, they were all too busy with the actual war itself. So they came up with the scheme of using an actor. I happen to resemble Dorling slightly and was resting at the time – well, for quite some time, to be honest. I have a tiny weakness for the juice

of the grape, you see, and it sometimes has a slightly deleterious effect on my performances. Anyway, that's how I got started and I've been touring now for...what is the date? Oh, yes –

five years. Not taxing work, except for a bit of improv occasionally, and I doubt if I'll ever get proper recognition when it's over, but the fees are regular and the audiences seem to like me.' Malf's face fell. 'I didn't muddle my lines, did I?

Didn't give myself away saying something foolish? I've been fully professional, you know, and studied thoroughly. Can't understand the highly technical stuff of course, even though I can spout the jargon on cue, but then neither can the real Dorling, apparently. But I'd hate to think –'

'I assure you,' the Doctor said, 'that your performance was faultless. I already had my suspicions that you might not be who you were supposed to be.'

'But you won't let on that you know, will you? I don't know what Hevist and Selto would say. They can be most vexing at times, and I'd probably lose the part.'

'I promise I won't say anything about our little discussion if you answer one last question absolutely truthfully and without hesitation.'

Malf let out a sigh of relief. 'Certainly. What is it?'

The Doctor looked at him closely. 'Do you know what pentatholene gas does?'

Malf blinked in surprise. 'Doctor, I swear I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about.'

The Doctor nodded and smiled. 'I'm very glad to hear it.'

He got up and moved towards the door. 'I trust you won't mention my presence here either. They might think it was rude for a guest to pry like this.'

'Wait a minute, Doctor. What does pentatholene gas do?'

But there was just the click of the outer door closing, followed by a brief trilling hum. Malf tried the handle but the door was locked again. He sat on his bed for some minutes in troubled silence, wishing he had a drink. Then his eyes turned to the standard console built into

the room's small writing desk. It had been years since he'd searched for anything like this with a console, but he was surprised how quickly he tracked the reference down in its science data base.

Pentatholene: A colourless, odourless gas. There followed details of its atomic weight, formula and a complicated structural diagram which he did not understand. *Properties: induces a mild hypnotic state in most sentient warm-blooded oxygen-breathing organisms, heightening emotional response and susceptibility to suggestion...*

16

Max

dentify. Friend or foe?'

'I The synthonic voice delivering the ancient challenge was not the flat, clear and powerful tone Sarah had become familiar with. This machine's voice grated and wavered as she stared almost mesmerized into its red eyes, which themselves flickered unsteadily. A little more of the plastic wrapping tore away as it straightened from the position it had been placed in: sitting on its pallet with its knees drawn close to its chest.

What she could see of its body in the dim light of the hold was scarred and blackened. Obviously it had been badly damaged in combat, but had somehow retained power in its circuits, which her clumsiness had released. But on which side had it been fighting? The pressure on her arm increased slightly.

'Friend, friend,' she gasped, as its hard fingers pinched her flesh. 'Please, let me go.'

'What ship is this?'

'A Union ship – I'm not sure whose exactly.'

'You are human – not of the Union?'

'No. I'm escaping from them. I was a slaveworker on the moon of Averon.' She touched her forehead. 'If you look closely you can still see the mark of my ident plate.'

The great helmet-head turned slightly on its massive shoulders, and she had an impression it was trying to focus on her. She realized its features were different to the workcamp synths – perhaps this was an Alliance machine? Then the grip on her arm weakened allowing her to pull free. Its arm dropped to the deck with a heavy clank. The glowing red eyes dimmed a little more. 'Power level critical,' it rasped feebly.

'Recharge immediately or unit function...will...terminate.'

Sarah's initial nervousness at being in the presence of a synthoid was rapidly fading, to be replaced by the disquieting feeling that she was watching something dying before her very eyes. But a machine couldn't die, could it? Doctor: where are you when you're needed? 'Look, I'm not a mechanic – I don't know what to do. I'm sorry.' Her words sounded either grossly inappropriate or completely inadequate even as she spoke, she wasn't sure which.

'Locate external power source...emergency coupling...' A plate on the synthoid's side sprung open. A complex multi-pin plug head was clipped to the inside of it, connected to a tightly coiled cable.

Sarah cautiously pulled the plug free and looked around the gloomy hold. Surely they would want to use power tools, cleaners or extra worklights at some time, but where would they put the sockets? She made for the illuminated hatchway dragging the cable along behind her. The hatch itself looked like something from a submarine of her own era. The glowing blue strip above it was grimed with dust, but had no apparent power connection or switch control, unless they were hidden behind it; some long-lived natural fluorescent, perhaps?

However, at waist height beside the hatch was a small box with a flip-up lid and strip of cable trunking running out of it.

That looked promising. But as she reached for it the emergency coupling plug jerked tight in her hand. The cable was too short.

She ran back to the synthoid. Its head had fallen forward on to its chest suggesting exhaustion in an alarmingly human manner. 'It won't reach – you'll have to move closer.'

The machine raised its head feebly. 'Insufficient...power.'

'But you must try.'

'Function terminating.'

‘Don’t you want to live?’ she shouted at it angrily.

‘Live?’ It sounded puzzled.

‘Straighten out. Lie flat and let yourself go limp.’

The synthoid collapsed backwards to the deck. Sarah tore away the remaining shreds of wrapping and plastic strapping that had cocooned it. Its body shell was torn up so badly that she could have put her fist deep into the holes. Some of the exposed circuitry was mottled with a crumbling powder like dried mould, and a few of the cavities were sticky with what she took to be leaking oil, which in the dim light looked disconcertingly like blood. Never mind, she told herself firmly, as she went looking for some sort of lever, it’s just a machine. There were a couple of metal rods with flattened ends like long crowbars clipped to the wall near the hatch. She unhooked one, jammed it under the synthoid’s side and heaved. It rolled over with a heavy thud. She flinched at the sound, hoping the crew wouldn’t hear it. But if it is just a machine, why am I doing this, she wondered, even as she levered the synthoid over a second time. For the same reason people talked to their cars? The synthoid was just a sophisticated robot, very much like the ones that had kept her prisoner. That it seemed to be on the Alliance side hardly mattered, since its allegiance was simply a question of programming. But all the same it was hard to refuse something that asked for help. Besides, I’m not a machine, I’m a person and fully entitled to do irrational things for foolish reasons, she reminded herself.

The synthoid rolled over for the third time. Its eyes had shrunk to tiny red pinpoints. Sarah untangled the power coupling and stretched it out towards the wall socket again. It just reached. She flipped open the lid to expose a pair of three-in-line socket holes. She frantically twisted the plug around in her hands until the rotating and pivoting pins matched and rammed it home.

The synthoid’s eyes immediately glowed brighter.

She leant against the bulkhead for a moment and let out a relieved sigh. Well, that’s your good deed done for the day, Smith; how many points do you get for saving a robot’s life?

Half an hour later the synthoid was sitting uptight and appeared, if that was the word, far more lively. Sarah sat opposite it, cradling the crowbar in her hands in case they were disturbed and trying not to look as more fluid oozed around the pits and scars on the machine’s

body. Even after the synthoid had explained its regenerative function the sight still made Sarah feel queasy, especially when, at its direction, she helped push trailing wires and tubes back into place to speed up the process. Its attitude to its own internal anatomy was far too precise and clinical for comfort, yet she could see the obvious advantages in a self-repairing battle machine. The process was still being powered by the cable that attached it to the ship's mains. She hoped the crew wouldn't detect the drain on their system.

She now noticed further differences in its design from the Averonian models. The lightly scaled body shell with protective reinforcements around its main joints was similar, but the shape of its head was quite different. Overall it looked a little like a samurai helmet, with a protective visor that could close over the recessed slot that contained its glowing eyes.

And its left hand ended in a heavy three-jawed mechanical claw instead of two, with a heavy-calibre gun barrel mounted on the forearm, not extending from within it. The right hand was five-fingered and though large it was otherwise quite human in articulation, with a smaller projector again mounted on the arm. In addition it had an integral moulded 'backpack'

containing rocket tubes, together with other weapons and utility equipment. Unfortunately, as with all the salvaged items they had received at the assembly plant, its weaponry had been de-energized and any unspent explosives removed before transport.

As it recharged, Sarah recounted her adventures up to their meeting. It felt good to talk aloud, even if it was just to a machine giving a convincing imitation of awareness and interest. Besides, she needed time to think. How might the synthoid fit into her plans? It would make a powerful ally, but would it obey her orders?

'So I was going to wait until the ship was well under way before sneaking out of here,' she explained. 'I thought perhaps I could find a radio, or whatever they use, and send a distress call hoping the Doctor might get to hear it somehow. Or, if I could get hold of a weapon, maybe hijack the ship and force the crew to fly to an Alliance base.' She smiled half to herself.

'That sounds pretty unlikely, doesn't it?' she admitted candidly, 'but I have to try something.'

'Plan as related had low probability of success. Why did you not wait

in the camp for rescue? You were safe there.' Its voice was steadier and better modulated now, and, she thought, carrying slightly more inflection than those of the Averon guards.

'It's a human thing to want freedom at almost any price, but I don't suppose you can understand that.'

'Synthonic units are programmed to work with all intelligent species belonging to the Landoran Alliance.

Courage, determination and self-sacrifice in the cause of the war are to be encouraged.' It sounded as though it was relating a set of orders.

'Yes, but you can't *understand* these qualities, can you? I mean, you don't actually *feel* them yourself inside.'

'Synthonic units are not programmed to "feel", or to participate in any irrational behaviour, except the utilization of random number theory during tactical evasive manoeuvres.'

'I'm sure you're not.' She frowned. 'By the way, how did you get damaged like that? And what's your name, or number rather?'

'This unit is designated as a Synthonic Mobile Infantry Unit, Trooper Class: serial number 36025D. On Alliance world Tarracos it was redesignated a Mobile Armed Auxiliary to conform with local military structure. Damage occurred while engaged in battle mode on fifth planet of system, repelling enemy known as Garvantine, also colloquially referred to by Tarracosian soldiers as "Garvs", "Three eyes",

"Slimers" –'

'I know the sort of thing; go on.'

'This unit was leading an assault on position known as Hill 37, when it was struck by an armour-piercing projectile which penetrated its body shell. Progressive loss of sensory input and motor control began almost immediately. Speculate projectile contained a synthetic short-lived virus designed to attack control circuitry and primary brain core. Optimum response indicated shutting down all nonessential repairs to concentrate on regeneration of brain core and replicating new neural paths.

Higher cognitive and reflex functions were inhibited during this period. Speculate this was when unit was acquired by enemy and

removed for further examination.'

'Well, that explains how you got here, 36025D, and now we're stuck with each other,' Sarah said. Then, thinking of Angelyn Marcavos, she added, 'I'm not going to call you by a number, and anyway 36025D doesn't exactly trip off the tongue. "Synth" isn't right. Anything I can have an intelligent conversation with should have a proper straightforward name.'

'Numbers are logical individual designations. Organic life forms are also regulated and categorized by numbers.'

'Yes, but only occasionally for necessity. We try not to let them take over our lives.' She suddenly screwed up her eyes and clasped her head in her hands. 'Why am I debating philology with a machine when I should be trying to work out how to call for help or take over this ship?'

36025D hesitated for a moment, then said almost diffidently, 'Because you are human?'

Sarah opened her mouth to protest and suddenly found herself laughing. It had been so long since she laughed that she had almost forgotten what it felt like. It was an intense emotional release and hard to stop. She held her sides as her chest muscles began to ache.

'Are you unwell?' 36025D asked, almost sounding concerned.

'You made a joke,' she choked out.

'This unit is not programmed for humour. An irrational response indicates proper mental functions are not yet restored. Regenerated neural pathways require further adjustment.'

'No, don't change anything on my account – I liked it.' She wiped the tears from her eyes. 'Humour usually makes people feel better, even when things are bad, like they are now.'

'Humour is illogical.'

'Yes, frequently. That's why it's fun. And while we're about it, why don't you stop calling yourself as "this unit".

Can't you say "I"?'

' "I," ' said 36025D obligingly.

‘I mean, use “I”, the personal pronoun, when you mean yourself. Say: “I am…” Uh, what? Something appropriate: Synthonic Mobile Infantry Unit, S-M-I-U – can’t make much of that. Mobile Armed Auxiliary, M-AA? No. AuX…X…M-A-X. Max. I’ll call you Max.’

‘Will this be good for your morale?’

‘Yes.’

‘As you wish. New unit recognition symbol and conversational configuration installed.’

‘Hello, Max,’ she said, finding herself grinning foolishly.

Impulsively she held out her hand. ‘How do you do.’

‘How do I what?’

‘A human greeting – you must have seen it.’

‘Yes, but we have already met.’

‘Yes, but now we’re on first-name terms. Before we hadn’t been properly introduced.’

‘This is illogical.’

‘Oh, boo to logic. Improvise. Be yourself. There’s nothing in your programming that says you have to behave exactly like every other synthoid, is there?’

Hesitantly, using its human-shaped hand, Max gently took hold of her hand and shook it gravely. ‘How do you do, Sarah.

Is that satisfactory?’

‘It’s fine. Now, Max: how are you really feeling now? We must start finding out who’s on this ship. Can you stand?’

Max slowly got to his feet. Sarah had to admit he looked impressive, which was probably intentional. If only he was fully armed and powered up she would feel a lot happier.

‘Can you manage without the cable?’

‘I now have over three standard hours of reserve at nominal levels of function.’

‘Well, that should do to be going on with. We’d better make a move. If only we knew how long the journey’s going to take, or when the crew sleep.’

‘How long since departure?’ Max asked.

‘Uh, I didn’t look at my watch, but about one and a half, maybe two hours.’

‘A freighter should have completed the journey to Averon in that time.’

‘You mean we’re going to be landing any minute?’ Sarah said in alarm. ‘I thought it might take a couple of days…oh, of course, I was thinking of the time it took the Apollo mission to go from Earth to the moon. Maybe we should stay where we are. I can get back inside that hollow casing again and you can play dead, and let them carry us out the other end. We’ll have to chance what happens then.’ She had to pause to take a deep breath, then another. She frowned. ‘Is it my imagination or is the air getting stuffy in here?’ She shivered and clapped her hands across her chest. ‘And it’s colder.’

There was louvered ducting on the bulkhead over the inner hatch. She walked over to it feeling very heavy-footed. There was no sound of fans. She reached up. There was no draught.

She realized Max was standing beside her, head tilted back.

‘Thermal scan indicates no heat output,’ he said.

‘Additional audio analysis detects no transmitted vibrations from any other part of the ventilation system. Conclusion: it has failed or been turned off. The hold is cooling to space through the outer bulkhead, and your metabolic functions have depleted the air contained within. You must leave or you will shortly cease to function.’

‘You mean I’ll die,’ Sarah said bluntly, taking another deep breath. ‘All right, I’ve no choice. But you needn’t risk being caught as well. It won’t harm you to stay here, so why not go back to playing dead. Let them carry you out when we land and maybe you’ll have a chance to get away.’

‘No,’ Max stated flatly. ‘We shall stay together.’

Sarah decided not to protest in the circumstances. Max unplugged the power transfer coupling and coiled it away in the niche in his side.

Then he turned the hatchway handle. It opened easily. Sarah peered cautiously through, looking both ways quickly. Beyond was a short dark corridor sparsely lit by a couple of the blue glow strips, with a steep metal stairway at one end. The air was a little fresher and warmer, but not much.

It was deathly quiet. Max stepped out beside her and stood very still for a moment, head turning, eyes glowing redly.

'Do you think something's gone wrong?' Sarah whispered.

'I detect no vibrations except for the drive system and random thermal stress activity within the ship's structure.'

'You mean the crew aren't moving? Perhaps they're all asleep.'

They climbed the stairs, Max's broad armoured shoulders just passing up the narrow well. The deck above was again dark except for the glow strips and just as silent. There were several doors leading off a short corridor. Max appeared to gaze intently at each one in turn.

'I detect no latent thermal traces, nor any current sources in the compartments beyond.'

'Well, what is there, then?' Sarah wondered softly. She opened the nearest door. The space beyond was totally unlit.

Max stepped up behind her and twin beams of light shone out from recessed lamps on either side of his head, illuminating the cabin. 'Thanks,' Sarah said absently. From the presence of the inbuilt folding pallets mounted along two walls, it was clearly intended to be crew sleeping quarters. But the pallets had no bedding, and Sarah's fingers drew lines in the film of dust across them. A row of lockers showed similar signs of disuse.

Outside the cabin again, Sarah looked up and down the still deserted corridor and hissed, 'I know these ships have a crew.

I've seen them when they're loading, and I heard them moving about in here just before take-off.'

'There is still the command deck,' Max pointed out.

They ascended the next flight of stairs. The door of the bridge stood before them. There was no sound from beyond.

Sarah turned questioningly to Max.

‘I detect no life signs,’ he said positively.

She opened the door.

Facing her was an observation screen through which could be seen the diamond points of stars against the velvet backdrop of space. Banks of control panels filled the rest of the interior, twinkling indicator lights illuminating it with colourful patterns. There were four deep, high-backed seats set before the consoles, presumably for pilot, co-pilot and two engineers. Each one was occupied. They were small grey four-armed beings with skins like old parchment, wearing complex body harnesses of interlocked silver bands. Smooth round heads balanced on long jointed necks. A wide-spaced row of small shiny black eyes stared unblinking at the controls in front of them. Nose, mouth and ears were simply dark puckers in their flesh. Even as Sarah gaped at them, all four heads rotated on their strangely articulated necks to face her. Lower pairs of arms reached for grey discs of metal clipped to their belts.

Max pushed her to one side and lunged forward with remarkable speed for his bulk. Both his arms lashed out twice, almost too fast to see, and each time there came a sharp crack.

Then he straightened up and stood back. The aliens slumped over their controls, their heads lolling at broken angles, and lay still.

Sarah caught her breath, licked her dry lips and turned on Max angrily. ‘Why did you have to do that? They didn’t have a chance.’

‘They are listed in my database as Maarcheen: members of the Averon Union. They were reaching for weapons. There was a high probability they would have harmed you.’

‘But did you have to kill them so...callously?’

‘I am programmed to kill efficiently, but I did not kill these beings, because they were never alive. Remember, I said I could detect no life signs before we entered. Examine them.’

Sarah looked closely at the nearest Maarcheen. Max’s blow had torn the flesh of the neck as well as breaking it, but there was no sign of blood, only metal joints, fine tubing and foam padding. ‘They looked so realistic,’ she exclaimed, then turned back to Max. ‘I’m sorry for shouting at you.’

‘Why do you apologize, Sarah? I am only a machine.’

‘Because,’ she said with a weak grin, ‘I’m human.’ She took another deep breath. ‘And I’m also cold and finding it getting stuffy again. These Maarcheen-shaped robots obviously didn’t need fresh air, but I do.’ She looked at the array of switches and lights. ‘It must be one of these.’

‘I am programmed for basic ship operations and maintenance,’ Max said helpfully.

‘Of course, I should have guessed.’

Max studied the engineer’s control panels for a moment, then carefully pressed a couple of buttons and adjusted a sliding toggle. The vented duct above the control consoles hummed into life, and Sarah felt warm fresh air wash across her face. She took several deep breaths.

‘That’s better.’ She squared her shoulders. ‘Now, I suppose we’d better find out where we’re going and when we’ll get there. Then maybe we can work out why it needs a synthetic crew.’

Max was already studying the pilot’s controls. He pressed a few contacts experimentally and observed the results. ‘The ship is on auto-pilot,’ he stated after a few minutes. ‘The controls are locked. Unless we discover the command override code for the computer, we cannot change course.’

‘But can you at least tell where we’re going?’

‘The destination and flight duration are not given in standard coordinates, but a coded reference; evidently for reasons of security.’

‘Oh, terrific!’ Sarah said with feeling. ‘Don’t know where we’re going, don’t know how long it’s going to take. What about the radio, or whatever it is?’

Max tested it. ‘It is a short-range device, suitable for ground to orbit and limited interplanetary communication only. The standard hyperwave emergency beacon is operative, but the signal would be broadcast. There is no certainty who would respond to it.’

‘The only response we’d get at the moment would be from Averon. We’d better wait until we’re further away before –’

Lights flickered across the control panel, there was a hum of power

from deep within the ship and the stars through the viewport blurred and shivered then changed colour. The space between them rippled and filled with glowing misty streamers.

Sarah felt her stomach turn over and clasped at the back of a control chair for support.

'What was that?' she gasped.

'We have entered hyperspace. It is logical to assume our destination lies beyond the Averon system.'

'And we're going along for the ride whether we like it or not.'

'That is correct.'

Sarah tried to sound optimistic, but it took a considerable effort. 'Well, it could be worse, I suppose. We'll think of something to do before we reach the other end.' She yawned.

'But I really must have a nap first or I won't be able to think straight. Why don't you, uh, get a full charge, or whatever.'

From deep down in the ship there came a rising whine, then a shrill scream of metal on metal. There was a short sharp bang, a dying rattle, and a puff of smoke was expelled from the ventilation duct before the hum of the fans faded away into ominous silence. Sarah coughed then swallowed anxiously and looked at her companion.

'Things just got worse, didn't they, Max?'

'It is probable that they have, Sarah.'

'Remind me to tell you about white lies, Max.'

The freighter's life-system was a mess. Signs suggested its failure was due to poor maintenance; maybe nobody had told the crew to look after it, and they certainly had no great personal incentive. However, the system was reparable, Max assured Sarah, given two or three days' hard work.

Unfortunately, unless they reached their destination well before then, Sarah would not be alive by the time the job was finished. For reasons probably also associated with the nature of the crew, the emergency reserve oxygen tanks were drained, there were no spacesuits or medical kit, and the single escape pod bay was empty.

Four hours later Sarah sat wrapped in blankets and shivering in the control room, trying not to move about or think of rising CO2 levels. The air should have stayed relatively fresh for longer, but the smoke from the life-system burnout had penetrated most of the ship before they could close off the ducts, leaving a thin haze that would not disperse.

She watched Max activate the emergency beacon. There was no other choice.

‘Remember.’ she said huskily, ‘if I don’t make it, find the Doctor or Harry Sullivan and tell them about the Averon moon camp. They must do something about it.’

‘You have told me this already, Sarah, and I cannot forget.

But your instructions are redundant. You will be rescued and so communicate this information to your friends in person.’

His voice actually had a sincere ring to it.

‘You learn quickly, Max.’

‘Thank you, Sarah. Now I advise you to stop talking’

Time dragged by. Sarah slid gently into semi-consciousness and her mind wandered. To avoid dwelling on her own fate she thought about Max. For some reason she was worried about him. Though he was just a machine she’d known a few hours, he seemed to have developed a distinctive sort of personality even in that short time. Which was absurd – unless the new mental pathways in his damaged brain had caused some radical change in his nature. Was he actually becoming a self-aware individual, or just responding to his programming more flexibly?

Perhaps she was simply indulging in anthropomorphism.

She had every right to be in the circumstances.

The last thing she remembered before the darkness closed about her was Max’s red eyes. She could almost believe they glowed with concern.

17

Alarms and Excursions

he disorder in the storage room was peculiarly localized, Cara o

T bserved.

The Doctor’s space pod seemed to have been knocked off its

supporting trestles, and two freestanding shelving stacks had apparently been pushed over on either side of it, so that they fell outwards, spilling their contents across the floor. The cause remained a mystery. It was no more damage than a man could have done in a minute, except that everything indicated it had occurred when the room was unoccupied and securely locked. The Doctor poked around the remains moodily with the toes of his boots, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his jacket. He wore a preoccupied scowl and rolled his lower lip thoughtfully.

'I just thought you ought to know, because your property also seems to have been disturbed, but it doesn't seem to be damaged,' Cara explained. 'I know you've been in to look at the pod quite often. Has it brought back any more memories yet?'

'Not yet, but I feel it represents something important. And there's still a name I can't remember. I feel if I knew what it was everything else would fit into place, and then I could find my friends.' He looked at the pod again. 'Oddly enough I had a dream about it last night.'

'Is that odd? We all dream. Uh, of course, I was forgetting again. What was it about?'

'My friends were calling to me. "Turn it on its head," I think they were saying. Then there was this pod and figures in long robes whose names I thought I ought to know. They were speaking to me but this time I couldn't hear their words. Then a flashing light, and an image of a blue box which seemed very important.'

'I think there's a fairly standard cryptic association of images for a dream. It could have been worse, believe me,' she added with the voice of bitter experience. 'Most of it's anxiety and unfounded guilt, probably, but the rest might just be nonsense. Try not to worry about it. Talking of nonsense, how's that device I can't make head or tail of coming along?

When are you going to let us know what it actually does?'

The Doctor looked at her thoughtfully, then drew her aside from the lab assistants who were restacking the shelves. 'Well, if you'll give me a hand you might see it working very soon.

There's something about Deepcity that I have to know, but I'm sure Director Kambril, for his own reasons, won't want me to find out.'

'Has this got anything to do with that ridiculous performance in the

corridor the other night?'

'It does as it happens. I'd like to take a look inside the secure files room without anybody peering over my shoulder.'

'Doctor, you can hardly expect me to help you break security. Those files are kept there for a very good reason –'

'Did I say I wanted the files? I promise I won't interfere with them in any way. It's the room itself that I want to examine. Now there's no reason I can't do that, is there?'

'The room? I don't understand.'

'Cara: do you believe in knowing the truth?'

There was a new stern depth to his voice she hadn't heard before, and suddenly she was conscious of how alien he truly was, and yet at the same moment it was her grandfather talking to her, and she was a small girl again.

'Yes, Doctor,' she replied meekly.

'Even if it hurts?'

'She took a deep breath. 'Yes. I believe we have to face up to reality in the end, no matter what.'

'Well, I have to discover the truth about something for the best of all possible reasons, but I'm afraid the consequences will be painful to many people.'

'The truth about what? Can't you tell me?'

'It might be best if you didn't know for the moment.'

'That sounds rather ominous,' she said, trying to sound offhand though she could tell he was deadly serious.

'You already have enough clues. Apply the scientific method and you'll be able to work out the rest, perhaps, if you discard your preconceptions. But I advise you to keep any conclusions to yourself, even if you don't believe them.'

'Doctor, you're starting to worry me.'

'I said it might hurt, remember? Now will you help me?'

She looked at him intently, trying to read beneath the baffling exterior. ‘Do you swear that whatever you’re planning will not harm Deepcity or our cause?’

‘I promise you, if my suspicions are confirmed, I can help end this war.’

And she believed him.

The short curtains swished aside to reveal the picture, and Elyze Brant joined in the round of applause.

Admiral Dorling stood back from the portrait, which depicted him in full uniform against a backdrop of stars and moons, then turned to Neels Prander and said something about a flattering likeness. Other members of Deepcity’s senior staff, most of whom were present, politely disagreed with their distinguished guest, and complimented Prander on his work.

The party then proceeded down the gallery.

The ‘gallery’ was a long broad public corridor between the residential units and the administration centre. Amateur artwork of all descriptions was regularly displayed there, including creations by the children of the complex’s school.

Dorling stopped to admire some of their work and congratulate a small group of young fresh-faced budding artists, who squirmed in excited embarrassment. After a minute the admiral’s aide, Lieutenant Selto, touched his arm, reminding him that they had to move on to the next stage of the tour, but the admiral appeared to ignore him and went on chatting to the children for some time, before proceeding on at his own pace. As he moved away, Elyze noticed the admiral seemed slightly distracted and almost impatient with his junior officers.

She saw the Doctor had stopped to examine the work on display, and she lingered to watch. Some of the children turned their attention to him, attracted by his colourful costume and trailing scarf They clustered round and asked where he had come from. He patiently answered their questions, cheerfully mixing fact and nonsense and pretending to be dismayed when they caught him out. Eventually their teachers led them away, still waving to the Doctor. Prander had also remained in the gallery to supervise the clearing away of the unveiling curtains. The Doctor wandered over and gazed at his latest work.

‘You’ve caught his likeness very well,’ he commented after a minute’s study.

‘Thank you, Doctor.’

‘A portrait of an unashamedly patriotic hero, in fact.’

‘Those are the qualities I see in him,’ Prander admitted simply. ‘I know at various times in history those attributes have gone out of fashion, but I value them, along with loyalty and duty.’

‘Quite. Very much in keeping with the rest of your works in fact,’ observed the Doctor, waving a hand along the gallery.

‘You seem to be the most prolific contributor here, and I can’t help noticing recurring themes. Conflict, the great struggle and death. Even some of the children’s art echoes it, when they should be drawing trees and sky in the wrong-coloured crayon and unrecognizable stick figures of their parents. Is this early exposure to harsh reality good for them?’

‘They must understand the world they are growing up in. I don’t pretend that war is pretty. I’ve been out on a few battlefields myself, you know.’

‘So have I,’ said the Doctor. ‘And I didn’t enjoy the experience.’

‘My work doesn’t celebrate conflict, Doctor, but we have no choice. If we cannot finish this war soon, they are going to be our next generation of designers and technicians.’

‘Doesn’t that possibility depress you?’

‘It’s a necessity – a question of duty and survival. No power like Averon must ever be allowed to threaten decent people again. And if I can play my part in ensuring that happens, I will. We must never forget Landor and what Averon did to it.’

‘Yes, I noticed your painting of Landor: “Home”. Very moving. You’re obviously passionate about it, despite the fact that you can hardly be old enough to remember it yourself.

You don’t think it might confuse the children? They must regard Deepcity as their home now.’

‘They mustn’t forget their inheritance.’

‘No, but they must be free to learn as well. Not to take on the burden of the previous generation’s fears and prejudices uncritically. Eventually the book must be closed and the past allowed to rest for the sake of the future. A peaceful future.’

‘Peace demands certain sacrifices.’

‘Victory at any price?’

‘Yes.’

The Doctor smiled grimly. ‘You don’t mean that literally, do you? Not at any price? Because if you do we are talking about blind revenge; a very different thing to fighting for survival. Revenge tends to breed reprisal and a never-ending vicious circle. It has to stop somewhere. Suppose I were to offer you the surrender of the Union, with all the safeguards against renewed hostilities you could wish for, would you accept?’

‘Averon would never surrender.’

‘The rest of the Union might secede from it, given a chance. After all these years they must be heartily sick of the war.’

‘There have been plenty of chances for peace between individual Union and Alliance worlds. We haven’t stood in their way. But the Union always breaks their word sooner or later.’

‘Yes, you even portray their treachery, I notice.’ He nodded towards a row of paintings. ‘ *Betrayal on Kanthos, The shattered dream, Ambush!* Clever the way you put human nuances of expression on to alien faces. You can tell they are deceitful just by looking at them.’

‘It’s historical fact. They must learn that you can’t trust a bunch of –’ Prander bit back his next words, but the Doctor beamed at him with cold satisfaction.

‘You don’t really like non-humans much, do you, Mr Prander? Lucky you don’t get many of them visiting Deepcity.

By the way, when do you want me for my first sitting?’

Prander turned and walked stiffly away.

You’re a fool, Neels Prander, Elyze thought angrily. Then she realized the Doctor was now looking at her. His eyes seemed to penetrate

depths she'd rather stayed hidden, and it was as if he could read all her fears and discontent. She turned away. How much did he know?

Malf threw his admiral's cap down on his bed and rounded on Hevist and Selto like a dog that has been kicked once too often.

'Never hurry me along like that in public again,' he exclaimed angrily.

'You keep up to schedule,' Hevist replied.

'Are you questioning my sense of timing? I was drawing out a performance before you two were even born. You don't simply leave the stage, you make an exit graciously. Besides, Dorling wouldn't leave a crowd of disappointed juniors in his wake. I know him.'

'Really.'

'Yes, like any professional knows his character.'

'Oh, let him have a drink,' said Selto irritably.

'I do not require artificial aids to give a performance, either for myself or my audience, thank you.'

Hevist and Selto exchanged troubled glances, and then each took a step closer to Malf, who suddenly shrank back, regretting his words.

'Just what're you talking about, Malf?'

Malf rallied with an effort. 'I'm not a fool, I know what's been going on.'

'What do you mean?'

'The gas – pentatholene. I've done my research. Did you think you could deceive an old stager for ever? And if you do not cease its use forthwith, I'll have to reconsider our agreement.'

Hevist loomed over him and raised a fist menacingly. 'You do and I'll –'

'You'll do what?' said Malf, shivering inside with the thrill of defiance but standing his ground. 'Lay a finger on Admiral Dorling, hero of the Alliance? I only have to raise my voice and guards will come running. I'll say you were being grossly insubordinate and they'll clap you in the brig.'

‘We’ll tell them who you really are,’ said Selto.

‘Denounce me and you denounce yourselves. Would you destroy all the good work I’ve done? And would anyone here believe even the genuine article after that? I don’t think so.’

Hevist uncertainly lowered his fist.

‘That’s better,’ said Malf. ‘I should have done this years ago. There are going to be changes around here, and the first is that you show your star performer a little more respect in future.’

Hevist and Selto said nothing, but from their expressions it was doubtful respect was uppermost in their minds.

The sudden urgent knocking on the outer door of the secure files room disturbed the rest of the two members of the nightshift currently on watch. The door was slid back cautiously to reveal the agitated person of Cara Tarron.

‘Did you see it? Did it come in here?’

‘Er, sorry, Academ Tarron – what are you talking about?’

asked the first operator.

‘The thing that’s just slipped under the door of the conference room of course.’

‘What thing?’

‘Brown and furry, almost as large as my hand, like a flatworm with legs – it moved very fast.’

‘I’ve never seen anything like that in the City,’ said the second operator.

‘Neither have I,’ Cara said truthfully, ‘but it’s always possible some sort of alien bug came in with a supply ship.’

‘Anyway, nothing can slip under the conference room door

– the runner channel’s too tight,’ the first operator pointed out.

‘Are you sure you weren’t mistaken, Academ Tarron?’

‘I know what I saw,’ said Cara haughtily. ‘But if you don’t mind the

council being bitten or stung by some unknown life form that you had already been warned about –'

'Maybe you'd better take a look around, just to be sure,'

said the second operator to his colleague.

'Why don't you go?' said the first.

'For goodness' sake,' exclaimed Cara, 'why can't you both look? It'll take all three of us to catch it anyway.'

'Security, Academ Tarron. Can't leave this room unattended. Maybe we should call maintenance –'

'There's no time, it might have scuttled off somewhere else by then. Why not lock the outer door and close this one so the thing can't escape this way, then everything will be perfectly safe. Nobody's going to rifle the files in two minutes with you next door, are they?'

The operators exchanged glances, shrugged and nodded.

The second operator carefully locked off the consoles, then thoughtfully picked up a file folder and rolled it into a makeshift swatter. They slid open the communicating door to the conference room, turned on the lights and peered within cautiously.

'Come on,' said Cara boldly, 'what are you afraid of?' She stepped inside the long room and began looking under the table. 'Don't leave that door open. Come in and spread out.'

They came in and the tinted panel slid shut behind them.

Hesitantly the two operators began ducking their heads about and poking into corners. Cara heard the faintest trilling sound from the corridor. She surreptitiously pulled something from her pocket, tossed it under the table, then shouted and pointed:

'There it is!'

The operators jerked about, just missing the entry of a shadowy figure into the file room, but in time to see a flat brown form shoot out from under the conference table and zigzag madly away towards the far corner of the room, weaving between the chairs in a flurry of many whirring legs and bobbing antennae. They leapt after it, knocking over chairs, colliding with each other, stamping and flailing wildly in an

attempt to squash the strange intruder. But somehow the creature managed to evade every blow, causing the pursuers to redouble their efforts and Tarron to clamp her lips shut in an effort not to laugh aloud. Amid the noise and confusion, nobody noticed the shadowy figure in the file room suddenly disappear. Then the operators lost track of their elusive prey, and were down on their hands and knees scrabbling about.

Cara snatched a glance at her watch and suddenly shouted,

'It's making for the door again!'

The two men saw nothing but by now were susceptible to suggestion and headed for the door anyway. As they did so Tarron pocketed the brown furry form that had come discreetly to rest beside her and followed them. The door was hauled open and they plunged out into the corridor, but there was no sign of the mysterious creature.

'Wait a minute,' Cara said sensibly. 'You mustn't leave your post. Call maintenance while I keep searching for it,' and she ran off down the corridor, head bent low to hide her face.

Around the corner she leant against the wall and allowed herself a fit of stifled laughter. Wiping her eyes she took the improbable bug from her pocket and turned the switch concealed in the fur of its underside. It was a mad thing to have taken part in, but she felt oddly elated. She hadn't done anything like that since her college days. She peered back round the corner but the corridor was empty. She frowned.

The Doctor had said he wanted two minutes undisturbed in the file room to prove his theory.

The room offered no place of concealment and as there had been no commotion she assumed he had left before the operators returned. But then why wasn't he waiting for her?

Perhaps he had turned the other way. She ran back down the corridor, past the file room and around the further corner.

Nothing.

It was as though the Doctor had vanished into thin air.

arah gradually became aware of sensations again. She Sseemed to be lying on a bed. Her chest ached and her throat was sore, but she was warm and could breathe easily. It felt wonderful.

'Hello, old girl – feeling a bit better now?' said a concerned but familiar voice.

She opened her eyes with a start. A pale blur hovering over her resolved itself into an even more familiar square-jawed face. 'Harry!' She jerked herself upright and hugged him in delight and relief, much to his evident embarrassment.

'I say, steady on. Got to observe the proprieties of the doctor/patient relationship while you're under my care, you know.'

'Keep talking like that, Harry. I thought I'd never hear plain old-fashioned English again. It's wonderful.'

Harry immediately became tongue-tied and gently had to disentangle her arms and make her lie back once more. As he very professionally took her pulse she looked around at her new surroundings. 'Where is this – another spaceship?'

'That's right. The *Oranos*, late of the Landoran Navy.'

'You're working with the Landorans? I've heard about them.'

'Well, not quite. People called Jand, actually, but thoroughly good sorts all the same. Bit of a long story as to how we got here – tell you when you feel stronger. But the essence is that we were following your freighter, though we had no idea you were on board of course, when we heard your emergency beacon start up. We wondered if it was some sort of trap and had to think it over for a bit before risking coming alongside and boarding you. Just in time as it turned out. I don't mind admitting you had me worried for a while, but luckily this ship has a well-stocked sickbay and I've had quite a bit of medical practice lately. All the same, it's pretty obvious you've been in the thick of it, old thing.'

'In the thick of it is about right – most of it was awful.'

'I know. Your boyfriend has already told us your tale.'

‘My boyfriend?’

‘Max the synthoid. He’s chatting to Dekkilander Chell’lak, that’s the fellow in charge, at the moment; but Max was in here earlier and wouldn’t leave until I assured him you were going to pull through.’

Sarah suddenly felt absurdly embarrassed. ‘He’s just a machine – he’s not even a *he* for that matter.’

Harry raised his eyebrows and looked at her quizzically.

‘Rather an unusual machine, I’d say. He certainly seems to have a soft spot for you.’

‘Harry!’

‘Anyway, I said I’d let him know when you recovered.’ He reached over to a wall intercom and spoke a few words, then turned back to her. ‘A visit from a friend now is just what the doctor ordered,’ he said with a smile.

‘Doctor! Oh – what about the Doctor?’

Harry shook his head. ‘I’ve seen nothing of him since we lost touch in that hyperspace vortex thing, I’m afraid. But don’t worry. If we both made landfall safely, it’s on the cards he did as well. I’m sure we’ll catch up with him soon.’

The door opened and Max entered, almost filling the remaining space in the compact sickbay. His glowing eyes immediately focused on Sarah. ‘I see that you are functioning properly again, Sarah. Dr Sullivan has helped you repair yourself as he promised.’

‘A couple of hours’ rest and she’ll be as right as rain,’

Harry said.

‘Hello, Max,’ said Sarah. ‘You look much better yourself.’

The scars of his battle damage had almost disappeared, and he seemed to move with more precision and assurance than before.

‘I have fully recharged my power cells and completed my self-repair programme. I suspect it is easier for a synthoid than a human.’

‘My sort of patient,’ said Harry. ‘One you just plug in and let them get on with it.’

‘My regeneration has not been perfect, however,’ Max said.

‘My replacement neural pathways have begun to generate feedback of an irrational nature, evidently the result of an error in my repair process. It has caused me to engage in speculation beyond my normal operational parameters.’

‘What sort of speculation?’ Harry asked.

‘For example: in performing the purpose for which I was created, was I inadvertently causing similar discommodation to others through my actions? Should I be influenced by the potential collateral suffering my actions cause to associated non-combatants? Could I have performed my function without such consequences? I must understand how to reconcile such conflicts in the future.’

‘Max, I’m sure you’ll be fine. If the way you’re thinking doesn’t match your original specifications, then you’ll just have to write some new ones for yourself.’

‘Then you will aid me by explaining how such feedback irrationalities may be negated?’

‘The trouble is,’ Sarah said, ‘some things simply can’t be negated just like that –’

‘This is all beginning to sound dangerously deep and philosophical,’ Harry interjected, ‘and I don’t think Sarah’s quite up to discussing it yet, Max. She must rest a bit longer.’

‘We’ll talk about it later,’ Sarah promised Max, ‘if you don’t mind waiting.’

‘I am a machine, I do not mind waiting. Though I am now more conscious of time passing.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Before my recent battle damage I held a perfect record of events solely for the purpose of factual reference. While I was on the freighter and you were unconscious, Sarah, I realized I had begun to originate random speculations about your chances of survival and add them to my memory record. I discovered this process makes time appear to pass at a variable rate; in that instance more slowly. The experience was…illogical.’

‘Don’t worry, Max, that’s the sort of thing we do,’ Harry said lightly.

‘Is it?’ Max said. ‘That is a fact of which I had not previously been aware. I will consider the matter further until our next discussion. Meanwhile, I shall rejoin Dekkilander Chell’lak. We have plans to finalize.’

He left the room, and Harry and Sarah exchanged curious glances. ‘An intelligent but troubled machine,’ Harry observed. ‘Do you know what he reminds me of?’

‘I know: Kettlewell’s robot. Except Max is inherently far more sophisticated, I think, and the process is happening in reverse. Max started out as a killing machine, but now he’s having doubts.’

‘But from what I gather it’s only been a few days since he got damaged. And he only met you a few hours ago. Surely he can’t have grown a, well, a conscience in that time?’

‘I did an article called “The New Computer Generation Gap” once,’ Sarah said thoughtfully. ‘About the way not only ordinary people, but older computers themselves were becoming redundant at an increasing rate because new generation faster models were being turned out every few months: equivalent to twenty or thirty years for us. And the faster models could learn from their mistakes and help design still faster models in less time, and so on. Maybe the few days since he suffered the damage has been long enough for Max to evolve into a sort of unplanned new improved model.’

‘Well, I’m just grateful he seems to be on our side,’ said Harry with evident relief.

‘But is he on our side because he wants to be, or because he’s still following his programming? Either way we mustn’t take him for granted and use him like he’s just some clever tool. I think he’s more than that.’

Harry scratched his chin. ‘Is he actually aware he exists, you mean? That’s a big question and a bit out of my league.

Do you think he’s, what’s the word, sentient?’

‘I didn’t at first, but from the way he’s talking now I’m beginning to wonder. But whether he is or not I won’t let him end up being driven mad like Kettlewell’s robot.’

Harry smiled at her. ‘I bet you take in stray kittens and birds with broken wings as well. But now you really must rest a little more.’

Sarah allowed herself to be tucked in, but as Harry turned to leave, she asked, ‘What’s this planning Max was talking about?’

‘Just something that should enable us to get one over on Averon.’

‘Good, count me in,’ she said sleepily.

Sarah slept for another four hours, then woke feeling fully recovered. Harry related his own adventures, gave her a tour of the *Oranos* and introduced her to the Jand crew. She recalled seeing some Jand amongst the workers in the assembly camp. This news was greeted with both anger and hope by their fellows.

‘We knew the Union had kidnapped Jand in the past,’ said Tramour’des, ‘but we did not know where they had been taken or why. Now there’s a chance we may yet rescue some of them.’

Sarah was puzzled to find the *Oranos* was still docked with the freighter as they flew through hyperspace together.

Chell’lak explained the reason. ‘Your example of stowing away inside salvaged machinery has suggested a method of infiltrating whatever facility lies at the freighter’s final destination, Sarah’jane’smith. We still do not know why the freighter should have been manned by Maarcheen robots but we have taken advantage of the fact. Our technicians have repaired the damage your synthoid, ah, Max, did to them, and have also erased from their memories all records of your intrusion. We shall conceal a small party on board and let the freighter continue on as before, with the *Oranos* monitoring its progress by long-range scanner. After landing, the party will remain concealed for as long as possible while making a reconnaissance of the enemy base. If the opportunity arises they may also attempt some sabotage, but this will depend on what they find. The salvage being carried on the freighter suggests its destination is an important technical research centre – something we had no idea Averon maintained outside its own system – and it may hold items more valuable to us intact. These we shall attempt to liberate if possible. The *Oranos* will hold herself ready to make a fast retrieval of the party when a suitable rendezvous point can be determined.’

‘It sounds pretty risky,’ said Sarah.

‘It is,’ Chell admitted, ‘but we are soldiers and the potential reward

justifies any risk.'

Sarah nodded. 'Right, when do we start?'

Harry looked at her in alarm. 'Now wait a minute, old girl, this is no –'

'If you're going to say this is no job for a woman, I shall kick you in the shins,' Sarah said hotly. 'It's obvious there are hardly enough of you to crew this ship and form a commando party. Well, I can't fly a spaceship, but after tagging along after the Doctor for over a year I've had plenty of practice creeping round places I shouldn't be in. I can use a gun and I want to do anything I can that will hurt Averon or help close that slave camp down and that's all there is to be said.'

'You have spirited and forceful females where you come from, Harry'sullivan,' Chell observed with a smile.

'That has been pointed out before,' Harry said dryly.

An hour later, Sarah, Harry, Max, Chell and two Jand crewmen – Dekander Callon'mal, an artificer, and Hectander Orsang'tor, a munitions expert – took their places in the freighter's hold. Carefully prepared and concealed niches in the larger pieces of salvage were ready for them when the time came. Their equipment included insulated suits and respirators, as the ship's damaged life-support system was left untouched, suggesting it had failed when it had been last switched off. They would leave it to the reactivated crew to decide on repairs, if and when they noticed it. Max, with fake burn marks and torn strips of metal adorning his body, resumed his place on the transportation pallet and went into low power mode while fresh plastic sheeting was wrapped around him. Sarah thought he would have the most comfortable journey of them all.

Chell gave a final okay over his narrow beam communicator and the *Oranos* undocked and pulled away until it was outside the freighter's detector range. Time-coded instructions within the crew's brains reactivated them, but they sensed no lapse in time as false data had been fed in to fill the missing hours.

The flight into the unknown continued.

Almost ten hours later, alarms aboard the *Oranos* sounded as the freighter dropped out of hyperspace. The *Oranos* itself followed discreetly a few seconds later. Passive sensors scanned their new surroundings as they followed the freighter in towards the new sun.

Their readings caused Tramour'des to frown in displeasure.

They had emerged on the outskirts of a remote system that was nothing but a number on the star charts. It was listed as having minor planetoids, asteroid belts and a couple of frozen gas giants, but no Jand-type worlds large enough to support habitable biospheres. No Averonian, Jand or human could live unprotected anywhere in the system. Was that why they were using robots, Tramour wondered. Perhaps the base had no environment support facilities whatsoever? That would make it harder to detect. And the reconnaissance party only had basic survival suits. He'd better warn Chell of the possible danger.

'Losing precision track on freighter, sir,' the scanner monitor reported even as he came to his decision.

'Why?'

'Interference from a charged dust cloud associated with the asteroid belt they're just passing through, I think, sir.'

'Helm: close up to one and a half standard detector radii,'

Tramour ordered. 'Communications: open the channel to Dekkilander Chell'lak.'

'They've gone, sir,' the monitor said suddenly. 'The ship track and the Dekkilander's pulsebeam tracer – they just vanished!'

19

Execution

he urgent beeping of his bedside communicator woke Kam

T bril.

Blearily he turned on the sidelight and hit the receive button. Andez's voice issued from the speaker. 'We've got a silent alarm alert. There's an intruder in the sub-complex business room.'

Kambril was suddenly wide awake. 'Who?'

‘The Doctor. It’s all right: the guards have him cornered –

he can’t escape.’

‘I’ll be there in five minutes.’

He was still pulling on his clothes as he passed Scout, standing ever vigilant in his usual alcove beside the front door of the apartment. The synthoid silently fell in behind him as he headed for the travel tube. A minute’s ride took him into the heart of the administration block. There were guards posted outside the conference and file rooms. He brushed past them and the door slid shut at his back. He saw with satisfaction that the rest of the regular council were already there: Andez, Lassiter, Morven, Oban and Brant. They were all evidently anxious and still blinking the sleep from their eyes, but he thought Brant looked particularly distressed and her gaze shied away from his.

The connecting door to the file room was open, as was the concealed panel in its far wall. Even as Kambril took this in an elevator capsule rose into view and disgorged the Doctor and two guards. The Doctor’s clothing was in disarray, suggesting he had put up a fight and his hands were shackled behind him, but he still managed an infuriating smile as though he was granting them the privilege of an audience. He was pushed forward into the conference room to stand before the lower end of the table. One of the guards put his sonic screwdriver, copper bracelet and a few more confiscated pocket-sized electronic devices on the table before Kambril and Andez.

Kambril prodded at the assortment for a moment then looked at the Doctor. ‘I suppose you used these to detect the panel in the other room and override the security locks?’

‘I have this terrible sense of curiosity,’ the Doctor admitted brightly. ‘When I find people are hiding something from me I just have to learn the truth.’

Kambril turned angrily to Andez and the file room operators who were standing awkwardly to one side. ‘How was he allowed to get in here?’

‘I left a device of my own in the corridor,’ the Doctor said, anticipating the reply. ‘It was programmed to run in here when somebody passed and cause a suitable diversion. It worked rather well, I thought.’

‘That’s correct,’ said Andez. ‘Academ Tarron alerted the operators

earlier that some small unidentified creature had entered the conference room. They chased it but were unable to capture it. Maintenance are still searching.'

'You might as well tell them to stop,' said the Doctor helpfully. 'It'll have self-destructed by now.'

'I suppose you made it and these burglar tools while you were working on that incomprehensible machine of yours?'

The Doctor smiled broadly. 'I admit the device is a perfect red herring. Can I have a chair by the way? It's impolite not to offer one's guest a seat.'

'It's impolite for a guest to pry into his host's private affairs,' Andez snapped, becoming drawn into the Doctor's foolish quibbling over etiquette.

'It's doubly impolite to attempt to brainwash your guests,'

the Doctor replied mildly. Then his eyes narrowed for a moment. 'And it's even worse than impolite to subject millions of beings to needless suffering.'

There was an audible indrawing of breath around the table and an exchange of quick anxious glances. He knew...but how much?

'Get him a chair,' Kambril said sharply. A guard brought one forward and the Doctor seated himself comfortably while Kambril glared at him. How could he remain so infuriatingly calm? With an effort he tried to match the Doctor's demeanour and asked lightly, 'So, have you satisfied your curiosity, Doctor?'

'Well, I was rather rudely interrupted before I could complete my investigations, but I did discover one or two things of interest. The room at the bottom of that secret lift shaft of yours, for instance. There are controls in there for pumping pentatholene gas almost anywhere in the complex, which explains the artificially boosted emotions of those terribly patriotic hate sessions of which you seem so fond. It must also help Prander keep morale and a sense of purpose firm over the years. That's his real job, isn't it? And to keep everybody subtly reminded that you can't really trust aliens, of course. Wouldn't do to start developing a conscience about killing them, would it? Then there were the genuine computer files you keep down there. I wasn't able to examine many of them, but the ones I did see were most illuminating. For instance, your armament production levels are

almost double what Cara Tarron told me you achieved when she showed me round the automated factory. And those lists of enemy weapons' designs: far more detailed than the best intelligence could possibly deduce. Then there were manifests for shipments reported lost to the enemy – yet the same ships seem to come back for more later. Considerate of the Union to return them, isn't it?' He shook his head. 'Suspicious, Director, highly suspicious.'

Andez leant forward across the table. 'When did you start to suspect?' he asked simply.

'Oh, almost from the very beginning,' the Doctor said casually. 'You tried to influence my emotions in this very room with a light dose of pentatholene when you wanted me to work for you, which was very greedy, by the way. While I was resisting its influence I noticed the wear pattern in the carpet. The edges indicated it was relatively new, yet it showed an unusual quantity of traffic passing in and out of the file room, as does the corridor outside. Quite inexplicable –

unless you were having conferences every hour. And you should put a mat down at the bottom of the lift so you can wipe your feet and stop bringing up some of that fine rock dust from the lower tunnel. It doesn't match anything from any adjacent room or corridor up here.'

'Thank you, Doctor,' said Kambril dryly. 'We shall bear that in mind in the future. Any other little points we may have overlooked?'

'Quite a few, actually,' said the Doctor, lounging insolently back in his chair despite his bound arms. 'I noticed your file room staff were not really very skilled keyboard operators.

Partly window dressing for the benefit of innocent personnel, I suppose. But then of course the room itself is quite spurious, and their real function is to guard one of the secret entrances to the hidden half of the complex where the real files are kept.

How far does it extend, by the way?'

'Far enough, Doctor. Anything else?'

'Yes. It's a mistake to use innocent people like Cara Tarron to do your dirty work. You did it to influence me at first, because her grief, her sense of duty and dedication to your cause are not only moving and admirable but absolutely genuine. The trouble is such people can't keep secrets they don't know exist. She casually told me of your reactions when I first turned up on your doorstep. You panicked and

insisted on setting up that improvised testing chamber for my belongings. You were frantic to know what you were dealing with, but were evidently quite unused to a *genuine* security problem. Then you suddenly became so friendly when you realized I could be useful: a lost and confused stranger who could be turned to your purpose. You completely forgot about treating me as a potential spy or even a major security risk, though you had every reason to be suspicious, not because of high principles or altruism but because you knew I could not be a spy.' The Doctor's eyes seemed to burn. 'There's only one way you could know that: you're all traitors.'

The Doctor's bantering almost playful manner had gone in an instant, to be replaced by condemnation delivered from on high: the voice of superior wisdom pronouncing judgement. It was so compelling that for a moment Kambril read shock, guilt and shame in the faces around him, especially Brant's.

But then he forced a slight smile The Doctor obviously didn't know everything.

Andez flushed angrily. 'That's a lie, Doctor. I'm a loyal officer.'

'How are we traitors, Doctor?' Kambril asked evenly.

'Who are we supposed to have betrayed?'

'You are traitors to the population of the entire Adelphine cluster. You've reached some sort of accommodation with Averon, haven't you? Because you've discovered how mutually useful a permanent state of war can be. A dynamic equilibrium and safer than peace! Neither side wins but neither loses either – except those pawns who do your fighting for you, such as your old outpost and colony worlds, which were giving you trouble before the war started, I understand, and who would certainly secede once it ended with Landor gone.

So you keep many small wars alive, for which your allies have to keep buying your superior weapons to help them fight, while Averon does the same for the Union worlds.' The Doctor leant forward and fixed Kambril with his penetrating eyes. 'Who actually runs Deepcity? When did you sell out your honour and the chance of peace?'

Kambril chuckled. 'What an imagination you have, Doctor.

So much extrapolated from so few facts. And of course you're quite right, well, *almost* right. Shall I tell you something that you can believe absolutely? I am on the same side I have always been on; I am

still doing the job I was placed here to do and I have never made any "accommodation" with Averon.

You can make of that what you wish in the time left to you.'

'And I'm still loyal to my oath of commission,' said Andez indignantly. 'Now put him in the sub-complex cells until we work out what to do with him.'

Looking baffled and frustrated, the Doctor was hauled to his feet and marched away. 'You can't do this,' he protested loudly. 'It's traditional to explain everything so you can gloat

–' A guard silenced him by driving his gun butt into the pit of his stomach.

'Bring his scarf here,' Kambril ordered as they dragged the Doctor away. A guard unwound it from the Doctor's neck and dropped in on to the conference table, and then the Doctor was taken down below. Kambril picked it up and tested its strength thoughtfully before glancing at Andez.

'It may come in useful for dealing with our other problem.

Two birds with one stone, perhaps?'

'Oh yes, I suppose that makes sense,' Andez agreed regretfully. 'If you're certain he can't be trusted any longer.'

'I'm certain. Scout.'

The synthoid stepping forward. Kambril gave him precise instructions and handed over the scarf The others round the table listened with varying degrees of detachment. Only Brant spoke up. 'You can't mean it. This is going too far – it's murder!'

'It is a necessary execution,' Kambril said coldly.

'Perfectly logical in the context of what we have been doing for almost twenty years. If you had any doubts there have been ample opportunities to express them before now, Admin Brant.'

'I could see it was necessary then, but all the lies have to end some time. Surely we've achieved enough now?'

'No. The plan has a minimum of another five years to run.

Then, only if required, it will be ended under controlled conditions. You know that.'

'I know,' said Brant bitterly.

The first light of morning angled through the blinds as Malf was woken by the sounds of Hevist and Selto slipping out from the adjoining room.

Hah, Malf thought. Going to check the transport early, were they? Couldn't face him this morning, could they? He lay back watching the bars of sunlight slowly turn from red to gold as they edged across the wall. He hadn't felt this good in years.

He should have put his foot down long ago. It was outrageous that an artist of his calibre should ever have had to put up with such treatment. But anyway, that was an end to it. They were leaving today, and he had no doubt the journey to their next engagement would be far more comfortable than previous ones. To his public he was Admiral Dorling, and they'd better not forget it.

Though it was still early he was up and had almost finished dressing when a slight sound disturbed him. He spun round to find the communicating door was open and Kambril's synthoid was standing framed within it. Malf quickly dropped into character. 'You gave me a start. Scout, isn't it? Silent footwork. Well done. Just the sort of thing to use when creeping up on the enemy. Has the Director sent you here with a message?'

'Yes.' As Scout stepped into the room, a panel in its chest sprung open and it pulled a colourful tightly rolled bundle from the cavity within.

'Why, that's that Doctor fellow's scarf. What are you –'

'You are requested to remain still while this unit follows its orders.'

The robot moved with incredible speed. Before Malf could regain control of his tongue to call out it had taken two quick steps forward, wrapped the scarf around his neck and pulled it tight. Then there was no breath left for words. Distantly he heard Scout emotionlessly repeating its orders as it choked the life from him.

'Use human strength levels only. Leave scarf with body.

Ensure unit is not observed arriving or departing from target's room.' Malf's body went limp, dangling from probably the most colourful

instrument of murder ever seen. Scout dropped him to the floor and the folds of the scarf fell across his still form like an impromptu rainbow veil of wool.

It was in this position that the guest quarters' robot cleaning monitor found him an hour later.

20

Special Announcement

he worst part of being handled along with the other freig

T ht, Harry reflected, apart from the cramped conditions and the innumerable bruises one picked up, of course, was the sense of uncertainty. External sounds were muffled by the carton and its padding. Airholes let in some light, but it had not been possible to position them or make them large enough to allow him to see any useful details without risking detection, so he had no idea what was coming next. In the end he simply cradled his pistol to his chest and hoped for the best.

The unloading seemed to take for ever. Eventually the carton in which he was concealed had been sent down some sort of conveyor out of the ship's hold, picked up and placed inside another container along with several other items of cargo. When the load was finally complete a door or hatch had closed, shutting out the light again. There had followed a brief sense of acceleration, steady almost vibrationless motion for some minutes, then deceleration again. The hatch had reopened and light had returned. More mechanical handling had deposited him on a cart or trolley, which rolled away smoothly for a couple of minutes, making a few turns left and right, before coming to a stop. His carton was slid off with a bump, dragged a few feet then left alone. He heard more thuds and grating noises as the rest of the load was set down, then the light snapped off again and a door closed.

Harry allowed two minutes of darkness and silence to pass before he cautiously broke open the carton and got stiffly to his feet, still holding his pistol ready. With his free hand he unclipped the small torch from his survival suit belt, switched it on and played it about him. Scuff-marked walls and floor, one wide doorway, no windows and a jumble of packing cases and assorted machine parts met his eye.

A typical store-room: just what they'd been hoping for. It had been a reasonable gamble that such a large delivery of salvage would not be examined immediately. Now they must make the most of whatever undisturbed time they had to fmd a safer hiding place. He checked the test gauge on the sleeve of his survival suit as he'd been shown, then pulled down his breathing mask and cautiously sniffed the air.

'I think it's okay,' he said softly.

Other cartons and pieces of salvaged battle machinery split open, and the rest of the party emerged. Red light glowed from within a large plastic-wrapped bundle, which suddenly heaved upright and split apart as Max rose to his feet and resumed full power. In a moment the six of them were standing in the middle of the floor.

Chell had some disturbing news. 'The communicator link with the *Oranos* faded out just before we landed,' he said softly. 'Unless it is restored we shall have to use alternative methods of signalling our position when the time comes, which may mean a delay in retrieval. Meanwhile, we remove any traces of our presence and move out of here before they inspect the new delivery.'

The concealed voids they had travelled in were quickly filled with loose items of equipment which had been packed about them for this purpose, and wrapping and sealing straps were replaced. Max's now empty pallet was tucked away at the back of the store-room. Hopefully nobody would notice the absence of one item in such a large and assorted consignment unless they had a detailed shipping manifest, and even if they did they would probably blame it on an error at the other end. By the time the confusion was sorted out their mission would be completed one way or the other.

The wide corridor outside the store-room was well lit by fluorescent panels, but was otherwise quite featureless and gratifyingly empty. Distant sounds echoed down it: the compound murmur of footfalls, voices and humming machinery. It reminded Harry of a service corridor in a large hospital somewhere between the laundry and the boiler room: an essential link but often deserted for long periods, except for the occasional lost visitor. He hoped that was the case here.

Weapons held at the ready, they made their way along the corridor.

Just around the second corner from the store-room was a pair of doors from beyond which Max could detect no signs of life. They opened on to a short lobby, half-lit by a frosted glass panel set in a door at the far

end. In addition there were two more doors halfway down on either side. With the outer door closed it was reassuringly quieter than the main corridor.

Sarah bent down and ran her fingers over the lobby floor then displayed the result to the rest: dust. Max scanned again before they cautiously opened the side doors. The rooms beyond were dark and they had to use torches, which revealed surprisingly ordinary public washrooms with all the usual fittings. Well, anything approximately humanoid and bipedal would probably require similar arrangements, Harry supposed. Weren't the Averon meant to be humanoid and bipedal?

The far door opened on to a room illuminated by a slightly grimy window half overgrown by fern fronds and trailing vines. Several stacks of institutional quality furniture and a certain mustiness in the air suggested a staff rest-room or utility space which had seemed a good idea in principle but had failed in practice, and had been abandoned to the storage of those items which were not worth repairing but were still too good to discard. The only significant feature was a large flat glass vid screen inset halfway up one of the side walls, which was quite dark under its veil of dust. They crossed to the window and peered outside.

The window was situated at about third floor level and cut into a vertical cleft in a wall of living rock. It looked out on to a stretch of semi-wild parkland, shaded by tall trees of several exotic forms and laid out with clumps of brilliant multicoloured alien shrubs. The ground was covered in grass or moss of green, red and blue hues. The park meandered away, the ground rising slightly until it was crossed by a thicker line of trees in the distance, through which could just be made out a very high wall. A few birdlike creatures flitted about the branches, but there was no other sign of life, intelligent or otherwise. Chell tested a window panel and found it slid aside with a few protesting squeaks, leaving an opening quite large enough to climb through and down to the slightly dank rocks and clumps of ferns directly below.

'A retreat with a back door,' he said. 'I think this will serve us well.' A battered cabinet was placed across the glass panel in the door and Chell gave further orders. 'After dark we shall establish a secondary camp outside in those woods, if there is enough cover. From there we can assess the extent of this base and the volume and nature of the traffic entering or leaving it.

We can also scout a suitable rendezvous point for the *Oranos*

– assuming we can regain contact with her. Callon, I want you to check the transmitter – make sure it isn't a fault at this end.'

The Jand artificer was examining the wall screen. 'Yes, sir.

By the way, I think this is still connected. It just needs turning on.'

'It won't give us away if we do?'

'No reason to if I set it to receive only, sir.'

'You can't tell who made it, I suppose?'

'Not without taking it apart, sir. Very standard pattern on several worlds. Could be a pre-war import anyway.'

'All right, turn it on. We might learn something useful from it – but keep the volume low.'

The soft dirge of funereal music filled the air as an image appeared on the screen. It was a black-bordered still picture of a face familiar to most of the party.

Harry gaped. 'I say, isn't that –'

'It is Dorling,' Chell confirmed tonelessly. 'In the name of the First Prophet, what are they doing showing his picture in this place?'

'Excuse me,' said Sarah, 'but who is he?'

'An admiral in the Landoran Navy,' Harry explained. 'We saw him only a few days ago.'

'And now it seems he is dead,' said Chen.

Sarah was frowning. 'But shouldn't the enemy be celebrating the fact, even boasting about it? Unless the Union normally show this sort of respect for their enemies?'

'They do not,' Chell said, shaking himself as though recovering from a daze. 'There is something seriously wrong here.'

Even as he spoke, the picture was replaced by the flashing words: SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT, accompanied by an urgent two-tone beeping. After half a minute this was substituted by the image of a

man in Landoran military uniform sitting before a desk, who looked gravely into the camera. It is my sad duty to confirm the previous City News report. Admiral Zeff Dorling of the Landoran Spaceforce was found murdered in his room early this morning. In connection with this incident, City Security has been instructed to locate and detain the alien known as "the Doctor" –' the Doctor's face appeared on the screen '– who went missing from his quarters last night, and whose distinctive garment was found at the scene of the crime...' A picture of the Doctor's scarf appeared. 'While the Doctor remains at large the test zones are closed. All non-security personnel will confine themselves to the City and recreational areas only. All personnel are warned to be vigilant and report any sightings of this man immediately. If the Doctor is watching this transmission, he is urged to surrender himself to the City authorities and submit to a fair trial.

'Admiral Dorling will be buried in space tomorrow with full military honours. May I add my own tribute to the many we have already received, on the tragic loss of such a fine man. Please leave your receivers on for any further announcements. This is Colonel Andez, speaking for City Command.' The sombre music and black-framed picture of Dorling returned.

Harry and Sarah looked at each other in mutual disbelief.

'The Doctor a murderer?' Harry said.

Sarah shook her head, slowly at first, then with more vigour. 'No. Absolutely not. There's been some mistake.'

Chell looked from one to the other of them. 'This is your friend, the one you told me about?'

'That's him, sir,' said Harry. 'But Sarah's right – the Doctor's no murderer. There must have been a mistake.'

'That I do believe,' said Chell heavily. 'Otherwise, how is it that we have followed a trail from Averon to what, all the evidence now suggests, is a Landoran military base?' They were all silent for a moment, slowly taking in the implications of Chell's words.

'There must be a reasonable explanation, sir,' Orsang'tor said, sounding slightly desperate, Harry thought.

'I certainly hope so, Hectander,' Chell agreed, 'though for the moment I cannot imagine what. Meantime this revelation has made a nonsense of our mission. We cannot spy on our ally's base. But do we simply

give ourselves up to the Landorans and demand an explanation, or attempt to discover it for ourselves? We do not have much time. If there is a search being made for the Doctor, our own chances of remaining concealed for long are drastically reduced. What is the quickest way to find the truth?'

'That's easy: you ask somebody who knows the answers,'

said Sarah. 'And as we know there are humans here, then it had better be me or Harry who does the asking. Then there's a chance we might get away with it if anything goes wrong.'

'I shall accompany you,' said Max. 'If there are Landorans here, then there are also likely to be synthoids of similar design to myself.'

'But what will you say if a Landoran asks you what you're doing, or gives you an order to explain yourself?' Harry wondered.

'I shall disseminate,' replied Max equitably. 'Sarah has already taught me the concept of the "white lie": a minor deception employed for a greater good.'

Chell looked at him narrowly. 'Don't you have any directives against deceiving Landorans, considering that they built you?'

'You need have no fear that I will jeopardize the mission, Dekkilander. Though I am inhibited from harming any Landoran, I am also programmed to serve the general cause of the Alliance, and to this purpose the link we have discovered between this place and Averon must be investigated. I find I can resolve the conflict between these two objectives without difficulty. I am also curious to discover the truth.'

'We'll make a reporter out of you yet, Max,' said Sarah.

'Now all we need is someone to talk to,' said Harry.

'I think I see a possible source,' said Chell. He had glanced out of the window as Harry had spoken. Walking slowly through the park was the figure of a woman with her head bent low. Even from this distance there was clearly a disconsolate slump to her shoulders.

'Something's bothering her and she's taking a walk alone to think it over,' Sarah surmised. 'She could suit us very well.'

'Break out the climbing line,' Chell ordered. 'Wait till she passes

behind those trees.'

Elyze Brant wandered aimlessly through Ribbon Wood, which skirted the base of the cliff wall and divided it from the test zones. If you walked far enough towards the head of the Valley the windows and balconies cut into the cliff petered out, and you could be truly alone and unobserved. It was a good place to think – if only she could get her thoughts into some sort of order. But she knew she would have no peace of mind while the guilt remained. She wished she could confess it all to a priest. But presumably you had to have genuine faith in something or somebody for the absolution to be effective, and she had just realized the only people she believed in were the ones she had been deceiving all these years. The decent dedicated workers of Deepcity – the innocent gullible dupes of Deepcity. And Cara called her a friend. If only she knew.

Would they understand if she said she was sorry? But she knew she didn't have the moral courage to speak up, and so did Kambril. He probably wasn't even bothering to have her watched in case she did something foolish, or something defiant. Was that the solution? The coward's way out. Leave messages telling the truth on everybody's terminals and escape the pain and guilt for ever? It would cause even more pain to others, of course, but how long could the lie continue?

She became aware that she had company.

A man and woman in grey utility suits had appeared through the trees from her right and were walking along a path that converged with hers. A synthoid followed a little distance behind them. As they approached she saw the woman had dark brown hair and bright features set in a neat oval face, while the man had a stong square jaw and dark curly hair. Vaguely she tried to place them.

'Hello,' said the woman as they stepped up beside her.

'Terrible news about the admiral, isn't it?'

'Yes,' Elyze said shortly, hardly looking up and wishing they had chosen some other time for a walk in the woods.

'Only saw him the other day as well,' said the man. 'Hard to believe, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Elyze again, but she let her gaze linger a little longer, receiving polite smiles in return. She couldn't put names to their faces or recall their positions, but she felt they were distantly familiar all

the same. How was that possible?

‘And this Doctor person – do you think he actually did it?’

The Doctor, of course. She stopped and faced them.

‘I don’t know how you got here, but you’re his friends, aren’t you?’ she said boldly. ‘He described you to us.’

The two hesitated uncertainly, then the woman said, ‘Yes.

I’m Sarah Jane Smith, this is Harry Sullivan and that’s Max.

We got ourselves smuggled in here inside a cargo shipment.

And we can’t believe the Doctor’s responsible for this murder.’

‘I know he isn’t,’ said Elyze simply.

There: she’d told the truth at last without checking with Kambril first. Perhaps the rest would come in time.

Meanwhile if she could save one innocent life it would be a start.

‘You know he didn’t do it?’ Smith said in bewilderment.

‘But why haven’t you said any-’

‘You can’t begin to understand what’s been happening here and there’s no time to explain,’ Elyze said with a firmness that surprised even herself – it was glorious to have a simple purpose she could believe in at last. ‘I can help. I know what they’re planning –’ she looked at her watch ‘– but if we don’t act quickly the Doctor’s going to die.’

21

Death in the Valley

he Doctor rubbed his wrists where the shackles had con

T strained them and looked hopefully at Andez and the two synthoid guards who had their gun arms trained on him.

‘Let me guess. You’ve seen the error of your ways and are going to

release me? And after being cooped up in that cell for all these hours, you thought I needed some fresh air first.' He indicated their surroundings with a sweep of his hands. They had put down on the edge of zone seven: the ruined town. It was bounded by an open expanse of shallow sand dunes, a jungle zone and a stretch of grassland.

The man was irrepressible, you had to grant him that, thought Andez. Aloud he said, 'No, Doctor; you're going to die.'

'Like poor old Malf?'

'So you knew about our counterfeit admiral? And I suppose you told him about the pentatholene? I didn't think he was really capable of working it out for himself. Well, you must bear some of the responsibility for his death, then.'

'But I didn't actually kill him,' the Doctor pointed out coldly.

'No, but most of Deepcity thinks you did, which is all that matters. Once I'm clear, this entire area will be swept by synthonic units, which will hunt you down and kill you while resisting arrest for the crime.'

'Resisting with what?'

Andez drew the Doctor's sonic screwdriver from his pocket and tossed it over to him. 'Don't even think about attempting to use it against me, Doctor – the synthoids would shoot you before you could even take aim. But after I'm gone, feel free.

It's an alien device many of the scientists have seen you use, and they also know it can function as a simple weapon. Maybe you can disable a few synths with it in some ingenious manner. It'll be a good test for them while demonstrating how dangerous you are. And it gives you a chance to prolong your life for a while.'

'A sporting chance, eh?'

'This isn't a game, Doctor. Just be grateful you can die fighting. A suitably edited recording of your death will be shown to the rest of the City. There will be speculation that you were working for Averon after all, and it will be held up as an example of how careful we have to be in trusting aliens in the future.'

'Quite right: untrustworthy lot, us aliens. And of course it gives you

another lever for their emotions so you can continue to manipulate them in your nasty convoluted game – what actually is your game, by the way? It can't do any harm to tell me now, and you wouldn't want me to die not knowing the whole truth. That would be cruel.'

'I'm sorry, Doctor, not even now. I'm a soldier and I don't like doing things this way, but I have my orders. It would have been so much easier for us all if you had kept your nose out of our business.' He climbed aboard the flying disc that had brought them out. The guards climbed in after him, never letting the Doctor out of their sights. The disc hummed slightly and lifted clear of the ground. 'We would have sent you back to your home world eventually, you know,' he called down over the rail. 'It really didn't have to end like this.'

'That's a great comfort to me,' the Doctor shouted back as Andez headed back towards the complex and his colourful figure dwindled in the distance.

Kambril reclined in his command chair in central control and surveyed the wall of monitor screens. This was the real heart of the City, he thought: the secret heart buried in the sub-levels that most of its population never knew existed. From here they could observe test zone trials, arrivals at the spaceport or traffic at the tube stations at will. From here he could watch the Doctor die in comfort – his comfort not the Doctor's, of course, he thought wryly. Perhaps the gallows humour was in bad taste, but he had to view the larger picture: to weigh the death of one man, one alien humanoid, against the continued comfort and security of so many other true humans. When considered in that light it made simple politico-economic sense.

Andez came in and took the chair beside his.

'Any famous last words from the Doctor?' Kambril enquired.

'The same nonsense as before. He seemed more annoyed that I still refused to tell him everything. If he was frightened he hid it well. You have to admire his spirit.'

'No you don't,' said Kambril sharply. 'Start admiring them and it clouds your judgement. Our whole operation relies on maintaining a sense of proportion and detachment, remember that.'

'I know my duty,' Andez replied stiffly.

'Begin the sweep,' Kambril ordered.

On the monitors a line of troopers began marching across the Valley through the first of the test zones and towards zone seven. Above them circled a couple of synthoid-crewed skimmers acting as spotters. There were restrictions on using aircraft in the Valley for obvious reasons, but Kambril could explain that today was a special exception. It all added an appropriate sense of drama to the proceedings.

'All safeties are off?' Kambril asked an operator.

'All off; Director,' he confirmed. 'All units will use lethal force instead of stun levels against any humanoid form they encounter.'

'A regrettable oversight, but quite understandable in the haste to deploy the forces and protect our citizens.' Kambril commented. 'Record all of this as they close in on the town, especially the Doctor's first moves. We'll dub on a loud-hailer request to give himself up afterwards.'

'Director. One of the skimmers reports a vehicle has entered the test area and is heading for zone seven,' said another operator suddenly.

'What? Show me.'

A screen displayed the view from the skimmer. In the far distance, entering the test zones from the Valley side and cutting across their course, a ground car was racing along a track towards the ruined town.

'Didn't they hear the order to stay clear? Divert the skimmer to head them off. They mustn't get in the way.'

'Yes, sir. But I don't think there's time to intercept before they reach the town.'

The ground car reached the outskirts of the town and tore down a rubble-strewn street in a cloud of dust. Harry's head and shoulders were protruding from a window on one side and Sarah's from the other. Both were shouting, 'Doctor! Where are you?'

The car slewed round a corner and started down another street. The skimmer flew low across the jagged rooftops after it.

In central control Kambril and Andez stared in amazement at the relayed picture of the speeding car.

'Who are those people?' Kambril said.

‘I’ve never seen them before,’ replied Andez.

‘They’re trying to save the Doctor. Stop them,’ Kambril ordered.

A bolt of fire flared down from the skimmer and blew a hole in the roof of the car. Four more heads and shoulders appeared from other windows of the vehicle holding rifles and a volley of fire spat upwards in return. The skimmer pitched drunkenly and veered off with smoke pouring from its underside. It disappeared behind a line of skeletal houses, there was a flash and a billowing mushroom of smoke rose up into the sky.

A colourful grinning figure suddenly leapt out from behind a pile of rubble to stand in the middle of the street. The car braked in a shower of gravel and stopped with its front fender almost touching him.

‘Doctor!’ Harry and Sarah both gasped in relief.

‘Hello, Sarah, Harry – fancy meeting you here. You’ve brought some friends along, I see.’ He caught sight of the car’s driver. ‘Hello, Brant – I thought I might meet you again.’

‘Did you see who fired?’ Kambril said in disgust. ‘One of them was a synthoid.’

‘And three of them were aliens.’

‘Jand, I think,’ said Andez.

‘It doesn’t matter what – wait a minute, wasn’t there a report about some renegade Jand stealing a Landoran destroyer?’

‘With the help of an unidentified human, yes.’

‘Alert spacewatch. Launch all patrol ships. Sweep the entire system!’ He turned back to the view of the town. The car was now speeding out the other side opposite to the advancing ground force. ‘Meanwhile, call out every available unit: ground and air. Everyone in that car must die.’

The car bounced along the track and the Doctor, sitting between Harry and Sarah in the middle row of seats, braced himself as best he could.

‘Are we heading for anywhere in particular or just running away in general?’ he asked.

‘There are entrances to old service and construction tunnels all over

these cliffs,' Brant called over her shoulder as she fought to hold the car steady, 'and I know them pretty well.

I'll hide you there and get back to my post. As long as they don't suspect I've helped you, I should be able to smuggle you out again. I'm head of the supply department, remember.'

'Isn't there any other way out?' Sarah asked.

'Only through the spaceport.'

'We have our own ship waiting to pick us up, but we can't get a signal through,' Chell said to the Doctor by way of explanation.

'The Valley's shielded,' said the Doctor. 'You'll have to get above the emitters.'

'That wouldn't do any good,' said Brant, 'because –'

A blast rocked the car and she swerved sharply. Three skimmers were closing in on them. Max and the Jand soldiers leant out of the windows and returned fire, causing the skimmers to pull back.

'Don't worry – we can hold them off for long enough,' said Chell.

'But can you hold them off?' said Sarah, pointing out to their left.

From across the plain, like scurrying beetles, the distant form of a line of tanks was closing on them.

'I didn't think they'd mobilize so quickly,' said Brant. 'If they cut us off before we reach the cliffs...'

'Those tanks are synthonic?' the Doctor asked.

'Of course,' said Brant. 'But why –'

'Then it's time to play the ace up my sleeve I think,' said the Doctor. They all looked at him in surprise. 'I took precautions against something like this,' he responded with a grin, reaching for one of his coat buttons. 'I suggest you shut down your sensors for a minute or two,' he said to Max, 'this may be rather uncomfortable.' In the rearview mirror Brant's eyes caught his and he smiled back as he pulled hard on the button. 'A canard device, spoof and moonshine...' It came free trailing a length of silver thread.

Just as a missile from the approaching tanks burst almost underneath

their front wheels.

In the corner of lab three the Doctor's strange device suddenly hummed into purposeful life. Cara, who with the rest of her staff had been standing at the windows watching the distant activity out on the Valley floor, turned about in surprise in time to see a pale glow surround the apparatus.

The skimmers danced crazily about the sky as their synthoid crews lost control of their limbs. The line of approaching tanks broke up in disorder as their synthonic brains went haywire.

The long barrels of their gimballed twin-energy cannon swivelled about on their independent turret rings, firing off at wild angles and blowing holes in the turf, the empty air and, occasionally, each other. In central control the screens dissolved into a snow of sparks. Operators snatched headphones from their ears to escape the deafening howl of static erupting from every speaker tuned into synthonic wavelengths.

Kambril and Andez stared about in astonishment. 'It's some weapon of the aliens,' shouted Kambril above the din.

'Then why didn't they use it sooner?'

'Then it's the Doctor's doing. It has to be!' said Kambril.

'But how? That little sonic device of his couldn't possibly generate this much power.'

For a moment Kambril could only gape helplessly. Then his eyes narrowed. 'A perfect red herring!'

'What?'

'That ridiculous archaic phrase of his.' He pressed an intercom button. 'Kambril to lab three. Is the Doctor's machine functioning?'

After a moment Cara Tarron's strained voice came on line.

'Yes it is, Director. I don't understand –'

'Never mind – turn it off.'

'But that's the problem – I can't.'

The smoke of the explosion was still swirling round the overturned

ground car. Sarah lay in a tangle of limbs on what had been the inside of the roof, but she couldn't tell whose were hers and whose Harry's or the Doctor's and she couldn't think because the echo of the blast was still ringing in her head. With a screech of metal a door was torn off, a metal hand reached in, grasped her arm and hauled her out on to the cool grass, where she lay coughing. Max reached into the car again. He was twitching incessantly as though receiving continuous small electric shocks, but he kept moving. A hundred metres away she saw a downed skimmer. Its two synthoid crew were sprawled on their backs, jerking and writhing helplessly.

Then they were all clear of the wrecked car, battered and bleeding from minor cuts but still moving. Sarah looked around. Where was Brant? She struggled to her feet. The Doctor and Harry were beside the hole where Max had torn the driver's door free. Brant lay in the remains of her seat.

Their faces were like stone. Harry glanced up at Sarah and shook his head slightly. Sarah took one look at the bloody remains of Brant's chest and stomach and turned away. She heard Elyze say faintly to the Doctor, 'Tell ... Cara that...I'm sorry...'

Then there was silence.

For a long moment the Doctor did not move. Then he stood up, turned abruptly on his heel and strode purposefully towards the grounded skimmer. The rest of them followed.

Harry and Sarah half supported Max, who still moved with jerky steps.

'Are you all right?' she asked anxiously.

'I begin...to understand...what humans call...pain,' he said fitfully as they passed the Deepcity synthoids still writhing on the ground. 'Your Doctor...is most ingenious.'

They all just managed to squeeze on to the skimmer platform. The Doctor operated the controls and with a laboured drone the disc slowly took off.

'Where are you headed?' Chell said as the air began to whistle past them.

'For the mountains. If we can get out of the Valley we can find somewhere to hide while we signal your ship.'

‘Brant seemed to think that idea wouldn’t work,’ Sarah reminded him.

‘Without her as a guide it’s our only chance.’

‘Doctor, how long will this spanner you’ve obviously thrown in the works last?’ Harry asked practically.

‘That depends,’ said the Doctor.

A security squad burst through the doors of lab three. ‘The Director ordered the Doctor’s machine destroyed,’ shouted their leader.

‘Well, I can’t oblige,’ said Cara angrily, ‘because, as you can see, it’s got its own built-in forcefield.’

The guards looked in surprise at the glowing haze around the humming apparatus. ‘Uh, right, all of you get back,’ said the squad leader to the scientists. ‘Squad: weapons to maximum power – prepare to fire.’

The skimmer crossed the green strip that fringed the Valley floor some way along from the main complex and began to rise up the almost vertical cliff face. Sarah clung tightly to the handrail and tried not to look down. Out across the plain she could still make out the tanks careering wildly about. Just five minutes more, she thought. She realized the Doctor was snatching glances at Max in between his piloting. Of course: as soon as Max regained full control it meant the rest of the synthoids would be back as well. A thought struck her.

‘Doctor – why haven’t they sent any human soldiers after us?’

‘Because they’ve become dependent on machines to do their fighting for them,’ the Doctor said. ‘But they will soon enough if they can’t shut down my interference generator.’ He looked at Max again and frowned. ‘Excuse me, but why aren’t you immobilized like the others?’

‘Max is special,’ Sarah said defensively.

‘I can see that. It’s remarkable he’s still standing, but how?’

‘Recent damage necessitated…radical central control circuitry self repair,’ Max stuttered out. ‘Behavioural changes have been observed…Parameters of awareness have been…extended.’

‘Fascinating,’ said the Doctor, peering at him with a gleam in his eye.

‘Doctor, you dare even think of tinkering with Max’s brain!’ Sarah

warned him.

‘Wouldn’t dream of it,’ said the Doctor. ‘I apologize for the inconvenience, Max. Just hang on a little longer and we’ll be out of the Valley and the effect should diminish.’

‘Apology accepted, Doctor.’

‘That’s right, old chap,’ said Harry cheerily. ‘Soon be there.

See, we’re climbing faster already.’

The Doctor looked at the controls again, then at the rockface rolling past them. ‘So we are,’ he said. ‘Now that’s very odd.’

‘Don’t knock it, Doctor,’ Harry said. ‘We want to go faster.’

‘But we’re already on maximum. The fans are driven from power cells so there’s no fuel weight loss, and the lift can only reduce as we get higher and the air thins. Which means either

_’

Max stopped trembling. ‘Interference has ceased,’ he reported.

In lab three the guard commander got to his feet, face blackened and ears still ringing from the explosion as the force field collapsed. There was a smoking crater on the bench where the Doctor’s machine had rested. As Cara looked in dismay at her half-ruined laboratory, the commander put his wrist communicator to his lips. ‘Device deactivated, Director.’

Down on the plain the synthonic tanks ceased their wild perambulations. Gun barrels and missile tubes swivelled round to re-acquire their target.

They were at the top of the cliff and Sarah once again told herself not to look at the ground a vertiginous mile below.

Before them the rocks shelved in a series of receding razor-back ridges, beyond which the blue sky merged with a bank of low cloud. The skimmer angled forward and crossed over the first ridge as brilliant needles of light cut the air behind them, blasting rock into vapour. But they were out of the line of sight. A slim missile arced out of the Valley and bore down on them. Max’s gun arm moved more swiftly than any human or Jand reflexes could have animated it, and a

bolt of fire met the incoming missile squarely while it was still fifty yards short.

The shockwave sent them reeling through the air as metal spanged against the skimmer's sides.

'I say – good shot!' exclaimed Harry.

The skimmer rocked and Sarah became aware of an unpleasant grating vibration under her feet.

'Shrapnel must have hit a fan blade,' said the Doctor.

'Going down.'

Rocks rushed up towards them, projecting out of the cloud wreaths like black teeth. At the last moment the Doctor banked and they slipped through a gap between two peaks.

Beyond was nothing but blue shading into grey, and the sun was a fading orange ball behind them. Then it vanished completely and there was only chill damp cloud.

'We've done it!' said Chell.

'As long as we can see to land,' said the Doctor. 'Are your eyes better than mine, Max? Perhaps you'd better take us down.'

'Yes, Doctor. I shall – emergency: brace for collision!'

Sarah had a fleeting impression of a vast blue wall in front of them, then there was an unreasonably solid impact. Sarah was catapulted forward and struck her head on Max's hard shoulder plate.

Fans whirring fitfully, holding them tight to the impossible wall, they began to slide inexorably into the grey depths below, accompanied by a long grinding screech of metal against stone.

How careless of us to bump our heads on the sky, Sarah thought dizzily, then passed out.

arah came to her senses again coughing; a pungent odour Sfilled her nostrils.

Harry withdrew the capsule he had broken under her nose.

‘Feeling better, old girl?’

‘This is getting to be a habit,’ she groaned. ‘Oh, my head.

What happened? I have the oddest feeling that we –’ She paused, blinking into the murky grey gloom and aware of heavy dank air pressing in around her. The Doctor, Max and the Jand were close by, the soldiers holding their weapons at the ready. Beyond them were the remains of their skimmer, which was resting at the bottom of a vertical striated trail gouged into an unbroken wall of blue that rose sheerly until it vanished into the fog-like haze. Far above was a pale strip of glowing cloud running parallel with the line of the wall. ‘We really hit the sky?’

‘Bit of a facer, isn’t it?’ agreed Harry.

They were at the bottom of what appeared to be a mist-filled valley dripping with condensation. The water collected into channels cut in the curving valley floor, which in turn fed a river that ran along its centre and vanished into the gloom on either side. From the symmetry of the lines it was obvious the entire construction was artificial.

‘But what is all this?’ she said, trying to sit up and wincing.

‘The Doctor thinks it’s part of the air-conditioning system for the Valley proper, so to speak – fortunately for us it’s not as deep as the other side. A condensation trap for the clouds, running right round the inner valley, which recycles the water to feed the mountain streams, and so forth.’

‘Then Deepcity, this whole place, is really –’

‘Inside a large cavern with a domed roof several miles high, hollowed out of an asteroid,’ said the Doctor, stepping over and squatting down beside her. ‘How are you feeling now?’

‘Confused. The world made more sense when I was unconscious. Everything in the Valley seemed so convincing.

And if this is an asteroid, why don't we feel as light as feathers?'

'They must have used some method of collapsing the excavated material into stabilized neutronium and plating the cavern floor with a carefully graduated layer of it to provide the illusion of normal gravitation,' the Doctor explained. 'But the effect is very localized and it diminishes far more sharply as you ascend than it would on a real world.'

'Which was why the skimmer speeded up,' said Harry.

'Exactly. And the air doesn't thin as rapidly as it should either. Then you only need a few extra trimmings to make the illusion complete. Somewhere around here will be the rails on which the "sun" rides, and the projectors that produce the

"stars" at night, and –'

Sarah clutched her head again. 'Doctor, please – enough.

Just explain why they went to all this trouble.'

'It's a very good hiding place for something you want to keep secret, of course. And Deepcity is very, very secret indeed,' he added with sinister solemnity.

'It also makes it a very hard place to escape from,' Harry pointed out. 'I don't see the *Oranos* burrowing through a few miles of rock to pick us up from here. Brant was right: the only way out is the spaceport, and you can bet that's pretty well guarded by now. Pity we haven't got the TARDIS with us.'

The Doctor stared at him, eyes wide, mouth open slightly, as though startled. 'Say that again, Harry,' he said faintly.

'Er, it's a pity we haven't got the TARDIS with –'

'TARDIS!' The Doctor shouted so loudly that echoes returned from the far wall of the valley. ' *That's* the word I was trying to remember all this time!' He clapped his palms to the sides of his head. 'Turn it on its head – the key – the last piece

– it all makes sense now.'

'Doctor, are you feeling quite well?' Harry asked anxiously.

He turned a brilliant beaming face to them. 'My dear Harry, I am

feeling perfectly fine, thank you. Now I know what actually happened to us before we got here – and where we've got to make for next. Are you up to moving, Sarah?'

With an arm from Harry she got to her feet. 'I think so.'

'Right, come on then.' The Doctor strode away, suddenly so full of renewed energy and purpose that he threatened to leave them all in his wake. 'Dekkilander Chell'lak – we've got to cross the river.' They set off down the slope through the mist. Fortunately the river was shallow, sluggish and easily forded. On the other side the Doctor set them searching along the inner wall of the artificial valley. 'There must be inspection hatches somewhere. We'll use one to get inside the secret half of the complex.'

As they spread out, straining their eyes in the gloom, Sarah caught up with the Doctor again. 'But why pretend Deepcity is not what it really is on the inside? Who were they trying to fool?'

'The civilian scientists and technicians, I should think. I sense a security-obsessed politico-military mindset behind it, at least at the beginning. Deepcity was planned to be self-sufficient and self-contained, and they realized it only required a little more effort to make it a convincing illusion of a valley on the surface of a real world. There was a war on and security demanded the fewer people who knew the location of the base the better. What they didn't know they couldn't tell. Even if somebody was determined to give it away, false star patterns in a false sky would have them looking for a non-existent world in totally the wrong places. The security, maintenance and support staff would have to know, of course, but perhaps even they wouldn't know the whole truth. Because somewhere along the line its purpose has been perverted. But to what ultimate end? Who knows the whole story – and who really runs Deepcity?'

'I detect activity ahead,' Max warned them.

'Everybody down here,' said Chell.

They crouched down in one of the drainage channels that fed the river. From out of the mist ahead came the clang of metal on metal, and the scrape of several pairs of heavy boots.

Then a distant voice: '...probably smashed themselves up flying over the edge.'

'Probably. But we find the bodies anyway, Pascal – every one of them

must be accounted for.'

'Yes, Chief.'

'You take Hensall and Crietz that way. Naversen and Backley, come with me. And remember they had a synth trooper with them – it might still be functioning.'

'Yes, Chief.'

One group of boots receded, the other started towards them.

Chell waited patiently in the culvert until Sarah could hear every chink of gravel and squeak of boot fastenings. Then he stood quickly, gun pointing meaningfully, and they all rose beside him mirroring his stance. 'Drop your weapons or we fire!'

The three Deepcity patrolmen, taken by surprise and facing six guns, had little choice. The Doctor raised his hat to the officer in charge. 'Ah – Captain Morven. So considerate of you to come looking for us.'

Five minutes later they were climbing up the inset ladder that led to an access hatchway, leaving the security detail bound and gagged in a culvert. The Doctor closed the hatch behind them, then led the way along a rough-floored tunnel that angled into the depths of the cliff in which Deepcity was buried.

'What is our objective, Doctor?' Chell asked softly as they proceeded. 'The spaceport?'

'No. As Harry said earlier it's bound to be guarded.'

'Maybe we should have tried to signal the *Oranos* while we were beyond the Valley's shielding. At least let them know what we have discovered.'

'It's likely the shielding extends over the condensation channel as well, and don't forget there's also a lot of rock between you and open space. Anyway, what good would it do passing on what we've learnt so far? We haven't any proof'

'What? My crew are witnesses to the freighter from Averon, and with what you've told me –'

'Your witnesses are, as they will point out, an interfering alien and his two unreliable friends, a boatload of renegade Jand, all telling an

improbable story of a link between Landor and Averon for which there is no hard proof. Even if the Landorans let you speak out, who'd believe you?'

'There are some in my government who will accept my unsupported word,' Chell said stiffly.

'At the risk of having your supplies of synthonic weapons cut off by Landor?'

Chell relapsed into thoughtful silence and they continued on, the Doctor leading them briskly and unerringly through a maze of service corridors, only pausing to let unsuspecting environmental engineers and simple track-mounted maintenance robots pass. Sarah knew their greatest strength still lay in their presence going undetected. But there was a clock ticking away. As soon as those men in the cloud trench were found the alarm would be raised again.

'Doctor – where *are* we going?' Sarah asked at length.

'A junction point between the secret half of the complex and the rest, located near to a certain store-room in the laboratory section. I noticed a map of the concealed doors on the wall of the sub-level file room last night – just before my investigations were rather rudely interrupted.'

'Just "noticed",' Chell asked. 'And you remember the way exactly?'

'Of course. I must have looked at it for at least eight seconds.'

Chell was silent again.

'And what do we do when we get to this store-room?'

Harry asked.

'We leave, of course.'

'Just like that?'

'Hopefully – we haven't the force to do anything more and I think we've outstayed our welcome. But we'll be back.'

'Footsteps,' Max warned.

They flattened against the wall as a couple of men in overalls walked unconcernedly across the junction at the end of the corridor. The

Doctor moved ahead, peered down the way they had gone, then waved the others on. Around the corner was a large section of pipework with a man-sized hatch set in it, which ran vertically from floor to ceiling and presumably formed part of the ventilation system. The Doctor unlatched it, revealing hooped rungs bolted to the inside leading upward. 'This is it. The hatch at the top opens into the upper complex. I'll go up first and attend to the lock. Harry, will you come last and make certain this hatch is properly closed behind us?'

'Right ho, Doctor.'

They began their ascent.

Sarah was clinging to the ladder halfway up the pipe, and could hear the whine of the sonic screwdriver from above, when alarm tones sounded from a wall speaker in the corridor they had just left.

' *Emergency, emergency! Intruders suspected within the sub-complex levels. All personnel report to stations. Close all security doors and access covers.* '

A thick horizontal curved plate slid out of the wall between a pair of rungs, caught Sarah in the stomach and pushed her away from the ladder until she lost her footing and dangled from her hands, pinned to the opposite side of the pipe. She gasped in pain as the force behind the plate increased, trying to close the last remaining inches of open shaft – and to cut her in two.

Callon'mal, who was standing above her, reached down and tried to pull her free, but there was no room for her hips to pass through. Then Max, who was behind her on the ladder, reached up from below, caught the rim of the plate on either side of her waist, and pushed. She heard a motor whine as though under great strain and wasn't sure if it was from the hatch mechanism or Max. Then there was a grinding sound and a whirr of a spindle running free. Max forced the hatch back into its slot. She felt Harry, who had squeezed up beside Max, catch her ankles and guide them back to the rungs.

Trembling slightly she climbed on and out of the top of the shaft and found herself standing in a machine space.

As she rubbed her bruised midriff she realized a different alarm tone was echoing about the upper levels with its own ominous set of announcements:

' *Danger: alien intruders in City. All personnel to assembly points. All laboratories to be secured. Leave corridors clear for security force use. If*

aliens are encountered they are not to be approached but terminated with lethal force. '

'Setting nine,' Chell ordered, adjusting the intensity setting on his own energy weapon, which resembled a stubby machine-gun. 'Them or us – no time for half measures.' His own men obeyed instantly. Sarah looked at Harry who nodded. She turned the dial on the side of her own pistol, aware of the Doctor looking on in disapproval.

'Remember Brant,' she said.

Without a word the Doctor turned and led them down the new corridor. Sarah noticed the decor was different from that below, and the floor was covered in some resilient rubberized material. Perhaps it was due to that and the still blaring alarm that Max did not give them any warning of the approaching danger.

Round the next corner they almost collided with a security squad jogging in the other direction. The Doctor just had time to punch the leader on the nose before lances of fire stabbed between the two groups. Orsang'tor fell clutching his thigh.

Sarah fired her own pistol and was surprised to see a guard fall backwards with a smoking hole in his chest. Had she done that? Then Max had waded into the mêlée, ignoring bolts of fire that blasted holes in his body shell. His great arms swung like scythes, sending the guards tumbling like skittles and crashing stunned against the walls. Then she saw the Doctor was half carrying Orsang'tor through the tangle of bodies shouting, 'It's just around the corner.'

They stumbled after him, rounded the corner, burst through a wide door into a store-room and slammed it shut behind them. Most of the room was taken up by racks of shelving, but resting on trestles in a cleared space was an oblate spherical pod with a couple of small portals in it.

'Hold the door for just a minute,' the Doctor rapped out, handing Orsang'tor over to Harry. Max dragged a laden shelf stack across the door just as something thudded against the other side. The Doctor pulled the TARDIS key from his pocket, approached the pod and cautiously touched its side.

Its form blurred and the trestles toppled, and then a mid-twentieth-century police call box stood in the middle of the room.

'The TARDIS!' Sarah said in relief and surprise. 'But how

–’

The store-room door began to explode into fragments as holes were punched through it from outside. Max and the Jand grappled with another rack of shelving.

‘Never mind how,’ Harry said, snatching a glance up from where he was tending Orsang’tor. ‘Just get it open, Doctor.’

The Doctor thrust his key into the lock and tried to turn it.

Nothing happened. The Doctor looked blank. ‘But it should work!’

The police box shape suddenly melted away into a plain dark grey cabinet, which in turn briefly metamorphosed into a mainframe computer module and then a rack of shelves mimicking the ones surrounding it.

‘It’s not my TARDIS!’ the Doctor said indignantly.

Sarah was in no mood for petulance. ‘Well, it must be *a* TARDIS of some sort –’ a heavy body crashed against the outside of the door and the barricade swayed ‘– surely you can do something with it?’

The Doctor’s face lit up. ‘Of course, a later model. Not key or touch-activated – a pure mind lock.’ He closed his eyes for a moment in concentration. The police box shape returned and its door opened smoothly.

The guards burst in. Their numbers had been augmented by a couple of synthoid troopers who led the way, brushing aside the remains of the barricade and raking the room with multiple bursts of fire, pockmarking the walls and cutting in half those shelves still standing. Then they stopped, paralysed by mechanical indecision at what their sensors detected.

There were no enemy aliens in sight, only an oddly detailed blue cabinet with a flashing light on top. It was standing in the centre of the room fading erratically in and out of visibility and accompanied by a breathless, wheezing, grinding sound.

The squad leader poked his head out from behind the troopers, gaped for a moment, then said, ‘Blast it – whatever it is!’

The beams tore through the ghostly box and shattered the opposite wall. When the smoke cleared no trace of the box remained.

Within the TARDIS the shaking and tortured groaning was gradually replaced by a steadier hum of power as the dematerialization pulse faded away. Sarah got to her feet and breathed a sigh of relief. ‘It’s all right,’ she told their companions, ‘we’re safe in here.’

They were clearly not in the control room she was familiar with however. It had the same pearly white illumination, and recessed roundels still patterned the wall panels, but they were divided by hexagonal pillars and set at unfamiliar angles. The Doctor was muttering to himself impatiently as he studied the controls on a console of distinctly trimmer design than his familiar model.

The Jand looked about them in amazement, and even Orsang’tor seemed briefly to have forgotten his wound.

‘The dimensions of this chamber exceed the external dimensions of the artifact in which it is contained,’ Max observed.

‘Yes, I noticed that at first,’ said Harry, with practised English understatement. ‘Try not to worry about it is my advice.’ He helped Orsang’tor to his feet again. ‘Soon have you fixed up, old lad. Doctor: do you suppose the sickbay is in the same place?’

‘What? Oh, probably,’ replied the Doctor vaguely. Harry took Orsang’tor through an archway into the interior of the ship, leaving further explanations to Sarah. ‘You travel in this…craft?’ Chell asked.

‘Well, one very much like it. They move through time and space you see. Of course ours is more –’ she became aware of the Doctor glaring at her ‘– homely. This one hasn’t got that lived-in-for-500-years feeling.’ The Doctor smiled. ‘Of course unlike ours it obviously does have a functioning chameleon circuit,’ she added quickly.

‘It is truly remarkable,’ Chell said with a slight chuckle.

Now I understand why Harry’sullivan was reluctant to explain how he arrived on Jand.’

‘It’s remarkable all right,’ Sarah agreed, ‘but I don’t understand how it got here. We were on our way back to our own TARDIS travelling by, uh, other means, when we got diverted. Doctor, what’s going on?’

The Doctor looked up from the console moodily. ‘The Time Lords are trying to buy me off with this flashy new model attuned to my pyschometric pattern.’ He looked up, apparently talking to thin air. ‘Well, it won’t work, do you hear? You can keep your fancy gadgetry

and advanced features. Why couldn't you have sent my own TARDIS

instead?' There was no reply.

Sarah looked at the Jand. 'He gets like this at times,' she whispered, slightly embarrassed by the Doctor's outburst.

Trying to mollify him she added, 'I must say it certainly didn't take off as smoothly as the old one, did it, Doctor?'

'Well, to be honest,' the Doctor admitted, calming slightly,

'that was probably due to interference from Deepcity's shields and abnormal gravity gradient.' He frowned. 'That might make precise materialization difficult when we return. If the space-time hyperplane stress is too high...' He trailed off into silence, lost in thought.

'It's all right,' Sarah explained to the others, 'you probably couldn't understand him even if he was talking aloud. Oi, Doctor! We've got guests, remember?'

The Doctor blinked. 'Sorry – what did you say?'

'This is all most diverting, Doctor,' Chell said, 'but I must continue with my mission. Is it possible for us to contact, or be returned to, our ship? It should be waiting for us somewhere in this system.'

'Oh, I should think so.' The Doctor turned back to the controls, his fingertips seeming to brush across the streamlined touch-sensitive contacts. Recessed screens lit up and he studied the results. 'There's a lot of activity at a point in space on the edge of this system's second asteroid belt: interference from high intensity energy discharges, rapid mass displacement.' He looked up at Chell. 'I think there's a battle going on.'

The *Oranos* trembled as another vortex mine exploded against its shields. A moment after that its frame shivered again as a plasma bolt was discharged at the fleeing craft that had laid the mine spread. A fireball blossomed in space.

'A hit!' somebody called, and there was a brief cheer. But Tramour'des knew the *Oranos* was still doomed.

He should have run the moment the enemy interference began, but he had hoped every second to re-establish contact with the Dekkilander's party. Now, if that call ever came, he would not be able to answer it.

They were boxed in and unable to reach hyperspace, assailed by twenty unmarked fast strike craft fighting in their own space and unburdened by hyperdrive generators or bulky life-systems. He and his brave, overstretched, outnumbered crew were going to die – but they were going to take as many of the enemy with them as they could.

A seeker missile flashed across the screens and struck somewhere aft. The concussion jarred him even in his braced and padded seat. The main power flickered and went out and the emergencies cut in. The drive faltered and died. The screen showed the enemy ships swinging about and converging for the final assault.

This was it.

'Discharge all missile tubes; remaining batteries on random firing sequence.'

And then came the strangest sound.

For a moment he thought the ship was breaking up, then he heard gasps from the bridge crew and twisted round in his chair. On the deck behind him a grey rectangular box solidified out of thin air. Then, even as he looked on in stupefied amazement, it blurred and became a curious blue cabinet with a flashing light on top. A door opened in its side and Dekkilander Chell'lak emerged. 'No time to explain –

evacuate the ship,' he ordered crisply.

Ninety seconds later the TARDIS vanished from the bridge even as the now crewless *Oranos* disintegrated around it.

Harry found his way to the TARDIS's poolroom, sank into a sun-lounger beside Chell, Tramour'des and the Doctor, and gratefully accepted the drink Sarah handed him.

'All your men have been checked over and found quarters, sir,' he reported to Chell. 'Minor injuries mostly – nothing to worry about. A little rest and they'll be fine.'

'Good,' said Chell. 'They deserve it.' He looked about him uncertainly. 'Mind you, all this still doesn't seem quite right in the circumstances – almost frivolous.'

The TARDIS's autotailor had cleaned and repaired their clothes, the

food synthesizer had provided meals, and they now sat in comfort on a colonnaded terrace of pink-veined marble beside an olympic-sized swimming pool. Max stood watching on solemnly, no chair being strong enough to support him; he reminded Harry of a dignified head waiter.

'We are effectively in limbo ' the Doctor reminded Chell gently. 'No time passes in your universe while we remain here. Regard it as a chance to plan and prepare calmly and to avoid rash action.' He looked at Harry and Sarah. 'And first, you're going to tell me every detail of what happened to you.

Especially anything to do with Averon and Landor.'

Harry inclined his head politely to Sarah.

'Well,' she began, 'the first thing I remember, after we got separated, was finding myself wandering about the highlands of a moon orbiting Averon...'

Four hours of ship's time passed and they were still talking.

'It comes down to this,' said Chell, summarizing. 'No one will believe this incredible story of collusion between Deepcity – and possibly other Landoran forces – and Averon without convincing proof. The only such proof is Deepcity itself, but it is virtually impossible to infiltrate by the method we used previously, now they are on the alert, and you say even this remarkable machine cannot safely return there.'

'With that shielding and mass discontinuity we'd most likely materialize underground or miles up in the air,' agreed the Doctor. 'Not recommended.'

'And even if we could fight our way in with a sizeable force,' Chell continued, 'they would have time to mobilize their reserve synthonic weapons. We would also risk the lives of thousands of civilian workers and their families, who you say are quite innocent of the deception.'

'Yes; somehow we must get them on our side, or at least make them take a neutral stance,' the Doctor agreed.

'And this assumes Landor will even let you try to raise an army against them,' Sarah pointed out. 'Remember they've got the most powerful navy around here.'

‘But surely their navy is not part of the conspiracy,’

Tramour’des said. ‘I cannot say I like the Landorans, but I admire their courage and know they have also fought valiantly against the ships of Averon. I have seen some of their battles and know the losses they have suffered. Perhaps most are as innocent as the Deencitv workers and are also being deceived by this actor who masquerades as one of their admirals?’

‘But what about the way we were nearly intercepted by those Averon fighters while following that freighter from Nethrass?’ said Harry. ‘Unless it was sheer coincidence, who was in the best position to tip them off? If it hadn’t been for that golden ship turning up out of the blue we’d have been sunk – even if it did give me the nastiest turn I can remember.’

‘They showed me some pictures of that ship in Deepcity,’

said the Doctor, ‘and now I remember where I saw it before.

It’s a private yacht from Tralsammavar.’

‘And what would, er, Tralsammavarians be doing out here?’

‘Not a lot,’ admitted the Doctor, ‘considering their entire race became extinct well over a million of your years ago.’

‘Over a million – oh, thank you, Doctor,’ said Harry sarcastically, ‘that helps no end.’

‘Max, you’ve been very quiet,’ Sarah said. ‘What do you think?’

‘I am still too inexperienced in judging the motivations of organic beings to offer an informed opinion, Sarah. But I am continuing to collate and analyse the data. I promise I will tell you when I reach a significant conclusion.’

‘I see. Well, I’d still like to know why my freighter was crewed by robot Maarcheen,’ Sarah reminded the others.

‘We can’t explain that or determine the correct course of action until we understand the true nature of this conspiracy, and something still does not tally,’ said the Doctor. ‘Is it really in the nature of the survivors of Landor to come to any

“understanding” with Averon after what they did to their world, and

would Averon accept such an arrangement in view of their known xenophobia?'

'I admit that puzzles me slightly,' said Chell. 'But it fits the known facts, incredible as they seem. There is collusion and deception between them on a massive scale.' He snorted. 'No, collusion is too gentle a word – *treachery* is more suitable.'

The Doctor scowled. 'Treachery – I wonder? I deduced the collusion from various clues I picked up in Deepcity and reasoned backwards to a possible motive to explain them.

When I accused Kambril and Andez they didn't deny it, but they acted as though there was something I'd missed. Another layer: one so secret that Andez wouldn't reveal it to me even when he thought I was going to die within minutes. But what?'

He jumped to his feet and began to pace about, gesticulating as he spoke half to himself 'Layers of secrets, lies behind lies. This is an inter-stellar-scale conspiracy at the highest levels and they don't mind how many people die to preserve it. Yet Andez and Kambril both insisted they were loyal; in fact they were almost indignant that I should suggest otherwise.' His frown deepened. 'Tramour'des, you said the *Oranos* was poorly fitted out – more like a converted merchantman?'

'That's correct, Doctor. Is it important?'

'I'm not sure. Perhaps we're not thinking big enough. But what's bigger than what we already know? A lie too big to see.' He stopped dead, blinking slowly, eyes widening. His mouth shaped words soundlessly, as though testing them out before speaking. Finally he muttered, 'Oh no! It's almost too cruel.'

'What is, Doctor?' Sarah demanded.

'But it has to be. It makes sense of everything.'

'Doctor!'

He turned to look at them, his face full of grave purpose.

'We're going to get our proof.'

'To Deepcity?' Chell asked.

‘No. Because the most important evidence isn’t there at all.’

23

Doubt

hey watched the synthoids’ sensor record of the di

T sappearance of the blue box from the store-room five times. Then Kambril turned to Lassiter. ‘What are we seeing?’

he demanded.

The engineer scratched his head. ‘This is a bit out of my league. You really need to ask one of the theoretical physicists

_’

‘We daren’t risk that – not until we know the implications of what we’re dealing with.’

‘Well, at a guess, I’d say it was a self-contained transmat machine. It must have come here as a shell folded up inside that “escape pod” of the Doctor’s. Transmat technology has been around for centuries, of course, but never caught on in a big way for long because it’s so vulnerable to external interference. This box may have been an attempt to overcome that problem.’

Captain Morven looked horrified. ‘You mean more aliens can appear anywhere in the City out of thin air?’

‘No. At least, I don’t think so. You saw how unsteady its dematerialization was – probably having trouble getting through our shields. It was obviously for emergency use only, as we now know the aliens came aboard with that cargo of salvage. And I guess its range was relatively short, which is why they needed the ship to rendezvous with – assuming they made the transition intact.’

‘Even if they did,’ Andez pointed out, ‘the ship was totally destroyed and there were no survivors or last minute transmissions, so the Doctor never had a chance to pass on what he learnt. I think we can be cautiously optimistic that the security breach has been contained.’

‘But this system has come to the attention of at least one group of renegade Jand and their humanoid allies,’ Kambril said. ‘Unless their entire force has been eliminated we can expect further intrusions, either open or covert. Therefore we must take appropriate precautionary measures. Lassiter: prepare the drive for manoeuvring. The only information that ship could have passed on about us was our orbital path, so we must move to a different part of the belt.’

‘It’ll take time. We’ve got to keep the accelerations and attitude adjustments slow enough so that nobody notices anything inside the Valley.’

‘Which is why we shall meanwhile double the system patrols, increase internal security and maintain full shielding.’

Lieutenant Oban looked at the empty chair beside the table, then at Kambril. ‘Director, about Brant. Just what do we say?’

‘Don’t worry, Lieutenant. I’ll prepare a statement about Brant, the Jand and the Doctor that will keep everybody happy.’

Kambril made his broadcast that evening, wearing his most sober suit and an expression of dignified mourning.

‘By now, most of you will have learnt that one of our most valued colleagues, Supply Coordinator Elyze Brant, died earlier today during the action against the alien infiltrators. I can now give further details about this incident, though you will understand investigations are still continuing.

‘Three Jand, a synthonic robot and at least two unidentified humanoids managed to enter this base concealed amongst a regular shipment of salvaged weaponry. We believe they were attempting to recover their fellow agent and saboteur, the so-called “Doctor”, already responsible for the callous murder of Admiral Dorling – Dr Emberley has confirmed his scarf was the weapon used to strangle the admiral. At some point the Jand must have taken Elyze Brant captive, perhaps as a potential hostage. They then attempted to rescue the Doctor, who had gone into hiding in test zone seven. Our forces were naturally mobilized to intercept them, and it was during this confrontation that Elyze, tragically, was killed.

‘Utilizing the disruption caused by an interference generator previously concealed by the Doctor, the aliens re-entered the base and attempted to conceal themselves in a storage area in the laboratory level. But they were cornered and killed in the subsequent battle with

our security forces. A Landoran destroyer, the *Oranos*, previously hijacked while in orbit around Jand, was detected in our system by patrol ships and destroyed. There were no survivors.

'I should mention a statement to our naval high command by the Jand leaders at this point. They believe those responsible for the theft of the *Oranos* were agents of the so-called "Peace Party", which has long thought to have been corrupted by Averonian sympathizers. The Jand government apologizes for the theft and totally disowns their actions. In the same spirit I ask you not to let this incident lessen the regard in which we hold our allies.

'Obviously many of you are, quite understandably, wondering if our security has been compromised by recent events. Let me remind you that those responsible have already paid the price for their criminal actions, and that precautions against such an incursion occurring again have been taken.

Now we must all strive to put the matter behind us. The finest gesture you can make in memory of our fallen colleague is to continue with your work in the manner she would have wished. A communal service will be held for her at midday tomorrow. This will be followed by a relay of Admiral Dorling's funeral.

'This has been a sad time for us, but I know your determination will not waver. In remembrance of those we have lost, we shall press on with renewed vigour. We shall win through in the end.

'Thank you, and good night.'

The camera light went out and Kambril sat back in his chair feeling mildly satisfied. He hadn't even needed to use the gas

– Deepcity was sufficiently saddened and angered without it.

Perhaps the Doctor and his friends had even done them a favour – as long as there were no further such incidents, of course. They had exposed several weaknesses in their security which he would see were corrected. He even felt a pang of regret over Brant's death himself, despite the doubts she had begun to express before the end. Perhaps it was best they would never know for certain just what she'd been doing driving a ground car for those aliens. Well, the truth didn't matter now. She was officially a minor martyr and that was that. A pity, because she'd been an efficient supply officer and it would be hard to replace her.

Cara lay on the bed in her own apartment staring at the ceiling.

At least she had an excuse to be here while her lab was being repaired. It gave her time to think. Grief over Elyze was mingled with guilt and uncertainty. Had she actually aided a spy? But the Doctor had promised he meant no harm. Now it seemed incredible that she had accepted his word like that without finding out exactly what he had intended. Yet there had been something so compelling about him that belief and trust had come easily. And now he was also dead.

She turned to the picture on her bedside table, a reproduction of the one she always carried with her.

Brin had supported and advised her after she had lost Mattew, now he did the same in spirit even after she had lost him. It was strange that although Mattew was a dear memory, she talked to Brin when she wanted sound advice. But then Brin had always known her mind. He didn't really answer, of course; it was simply her means of keeping a part of him, and her last link with home, alive. A harmless delusion that had helped her cope with an otherwise intolerable reality.

She looked at the image of his forever cheerful smiling face. 'Well, Brin? Do you think the Doctor really was a spy and murderer? He said if I thought like a scientist I could work it out for myself, which sounds too reasonable, somehow. And how did he vanish from the file room like that? Can there really be something wrong going on here?'

Before she had her answer her door chime sounded. It was Kambril.

'Ah, Cara. Sorry to trouble you at a time like this. I know Elyze was a good friend of yours, but the work must go on as I'm sure you realize. It's about the field tests for the first production MICA units. Do you think they can start tomorrow?'

'Uh, possibly the day after, Director. I'll have to think.

Please come in.' Then she realized Scout was looming behind Kambril as always. She didn't want it inside her rooms. It reminded her too much of the devices that had killed Brant.

'But can that stay outside, please?'

'As you will,' Kambril agreed, then added casually, 'That Doctor creature was uneasy about having Scout in his room.'

It was that trivial remark that drew a line between Kambril and

herself on some intangible plane. She suddenly felt apart, isolated. The only others on her side were the ghost of the Doctor and, she realized happily, her brother Brin.

The next morning Cara spent an hour examining the plans of the City. Just before the service for Brant she tracked down Neels Prander and drew him aside.

'Neels, I want help with something and I don't know who else to ask. It probably requires a little creative deception, and it isn't exactly official.'

'Of course, Cara,' he said, smiling slightly but his normally irreverent manner notably muted by the occasion.

'I warn you, it's rather unusual. You see, I want a diversion so that I can...'

She explained and his face fell. 'What?'

She persisted. 'I know. But I must have five minutes in that room undisturbed. Humour me, Neels. Probably there's nothing to find and that'll be an end to it, but I must know.'

Prander responded with a list of eminently sensible reasons why what she proposed was not only pointless but hazardous to her career. But Cara was adamant, and said that she was going ahead with or without him. Eventually Prander gave in.

'All right, I'll think of something. I can't have you making a fool of yourself and annoying the Director, can I, Aunty?

Give me a couple of hours to work something out.'

And he walked away shaking his head.

Admiral Dorling's funeral was relayed live throughout the City. Cara called a temporary halt to the refurbishment of lab three, and they all crowded round the big screen at the head of the room.

As the solemn words of the burial service were read out, the camera held a close shot of Dorling's still, almost serene face through the glass panel of the coffin. Then the camera drew back revealing spacesuited men standing to attention beside it. As the lid of the outer casket was slowly closed a hatch slid aside at its feet revealing a brilliant starfield. The casket rolled smoothly down a channel in the deck and

the men saluted. Through the hatch it drifted free for a moment, then gas jet thrusters strapped to its sides cut in and the casket accelerated steadily away from the ship in a haze of exhaust vapour. In, a few seconds it had shrunk to a sparkling point amongst the stars, then it winked out.

There was a long silence, then Cara turned the screen off.

The group broke up as they returned to their various tasks.

Nobody seemed to want to speak, perhaps conscious of the fact that there would be a second funeral the next day, which they would be attending in person.

Then Martyn Daw, the lab assistant, emerged from the dispensary at the back of the room wearing an angry expression, and suddenly the gloomy silence was broken by the plaintive demand: 'Own up! Who's taken my lunchbox?'

As Cara walked along the corridor outside the conference room that night she was aware that only forty-eight hours before she had been in the very same place. Except now she was going to play the Doctor's role. She consulted her watch again and tapped lightly on the door of the file room. It slid back smoothly, revealing Prander standing alone inside. She stepped in quickly and the door closed behind her.

'Neels – you're wonderful. How did you manage it?'

He put his finger to his lips with a secretive smile. 'Don't ask. Let's say the operators are just taking an enforced break and I'm covering for them out of the goodness of my heart, in the same way as I brought them coffee earlier laced with, well, never mind. You've got five minutes to do whatever you've got to, then it's out of here, understand?'

She pulled out a pocket scanner, got down on her hands and knees and began running it across the floor. 'Mmm, this has been well cleaned recently,' she observed, then began examining the wall panels, especially the side to the right of the door. Prander looked on with undisguised incredulity.

'What are you doing?'

'I think there's a hidden door or hatch somewhere in here,'

she explained, continuing to test the panel joints. 'I checked the plans

and there's an unaccounted for block of apparently solid rock between this wall and the next length of corridor.'

'Structural support for the upper levels?'

'No, it doesn't fit the grid the rest of the buttresses lie in.'

'Well, does it have to? There must be plenty of odd slabs of rock left over from the original excavations. Or perhaps it's part of the ducting?'

'Nothing shown on the service plans.' Cara's scanner suddenly beeped. 'And there is a void behind here. Quite a big one.' She drew out a fine probe and ran it down the seam. 'It's been well hidden but I'm sure –'

'Cara – time's up!'

'No! Just a little longer. I know there's something here and I want to find out where it goes to. There must be a latch –'

'Cara – please!'

'All right,' said a familiar voice. 'You did your best, Prander. I'll take over from here.'

Cara spun around astonished. Kambril was standing in the open doorway, looking at her with apparent disappointment.

'I really hoped you wouldn't be so persistent,' Prander said regretfully, then turned and left. Kambril motioned that Cara should join him in the conference room, and in a daze she followed. A couple of console operators, not looking the least indisposed, re-entered the file room behind her and smoothly took their places again.

They sat down at the long table. Scout, Andez and a couple of guards were already in the room. Cara took a deep breath, suppressing her dismay with an effort, and asked bluntly,

'Why did Neels give me away?'

'He was simply doing his job,' Kambril replied.

'His job? But he's just an – oh. He's security, isn't he?'

'Something like that,' Kambril admitted. 'When he warned us of your interest we thought it would be simpler if you were allowed to investigate but find nothing. We had that panel sealed and concealed

any traces of its use, but you were more determined than we anticipated. When it became obvious you weren't going to give up I intervened. What made you suspect in the first place?'

'I came across the Doctor behaving oddly outside here one day,' she said half-truthfully. 'It was only later that I began to wonder what he'd been doing. When I thought about it I realized there were inconsistencies about the room. I was curious. That's part of being a scientist.'

'I see.' He steepled his fingers and looked at her intently. 'I wish you'd kept your curiosity under better control. Deepcity is a more complex place than you imagine and the existence of certain sections has to be kept secret for very good reasons.'

'Kept secret from who exactly? And why – how can you doubt the loyalty of anybody in Deepcity after all these years?

It's an insult.'

'It was not intended. Cara, you will understand – if you can convince us you can keep the secret in turn.'

'How can I do that if I don't know what it is?' She frowned. 'And what happens if you decide I can't be trusted with this secret, whatever it is?' Her next words escaped before she could stop them: 'Just what did the Doctor find in there?'

Andez frowned and Kambril's face darkened as the atmosphere in the room changed. 'So, it wasn't chance that you were passing by the other night,' Kambril said slowly.

'You helped the Doctor. That was foolish – and criminal: aiding an enemy of the state to gain access to a secret installation.'

'I didn't know there was any secret installation here then –

and the Doctor was our guest. He promised he wouldn't touch the files and I believed him. He didn't, did he, because you'd have said earlier when you were listing his so-called crimes.

What really happened? How could he have got from here to the admiral's quarters and why should he want to kill him anyway? And then to leave his scarf – such an obviously incriminating clue. The Doctor was far too clever to do that.'

‘Not too clever to get caught,’ Andez said. ‘Director, I’m sorry to say there’s no point in continuing with this. She’s too suspicious for second-level knowledge to satisfy her, and is quite unsuitable for Ultra service.’

‘Ultra what?’ Cara said.

‘Regretfully I agree with you,’ Kambril said as though she had not spoken. ‘A shame – she was one of our best designers.’

Cara realized neither of them were looking at her directly now, as though she were of no further interest. Kambril had spoken of her in the past tense. A coldness began to steal over her as anger gave way to fear for the first time. ‘What’s going on? What are you keeping from us?’

‘Take her to the secure cell,’ Kambril instructed the guards.

‘We shall decide how she should best be disposed of later.’

Numbly she felt hard hands pulling her to her feet. ‘For pity’s sake what’s going on here?’ she shouted as they led her away.

‘For pity’s sake I won’t tell you,’ Kambril said, with frightening sincerity. ‘Believe me, it’s kinder that way.’

24

Proof

he TARDIS hung motionless in the middle of the great spherical chamber.

T As it was stabilized for the moment as a police box, the Doctor had increased the output of its lamp so that it radiated steadily with the candlepower of a lighthouse, throwing the inner framework of the sphere into sharp relief, and picking out the tracery of conduits, transmitters and light fittings that lined its walls. Sarah, peering out through the TARDIS door’s force curtain, imagined how magnificently it would echo – if there had been any air to carry the sound, of course. A tether ran past her through the door and out to where Max floated, his head turning slowly from side to side. They could hear his voice over the radio and the Doctor at the console could monitor the images

Max's optical system was recording.

Harry was watching over his shoulder. 'It looked a jolly sight more impressive from the outside, didn't it?' he said.

'That's the whole idea, Harry,' the Doctor replied.

Chell'lak and Tramour'des looked on intently, but said nothing.

'Is that what you require, Doctor?' Max asked.

'Yes, thank you, Max. Come back in and we'll move to the next location.'

Max turned and hauled himself back to the TARDIS, passing through the shimmering forcefield that acted as an airlock for the space-time ship. The door closed behind him and Sarah unclipped the line from his side and coiled it up neatly. The Doctor set the new coordinates and the TARDIS

dematerialized smoothly.

'Sarah,' said Max. 'May I ask you a question?'

'Of course, Max,' she said, stowing the line away.

'When you were trapped by the sliding plate in the shaft between the levels in Deepcity, did you wish we had killed the patrol we encountered in the cloud trench earlier?'

She blinked. 'Why should I?'

'Logically, had they been eliminated, their bodies could have been placed in the condensation river. The second section of the patrol would have been unable to find them and so would have remained ignorant of our presence. Further time would have been spent searching for them, which would have delayed the sounding of the alarm inside the complex.'

'And so saved me from almost being sliced in two,' Sarah concluded. 'Do you analyse everything like that?'

'It is the only method I have of gaining understanding.

Before my battle damage I followed my programming without question or awareness. Now I am conscious of many things for which I have no pre-set responses. I must create a new matrix to accommodate

them, so that I may continue to function at maximum efficiency.'

'I see. Would you have killed them, Max?'

'I have safeguards against inflicting unnecessary injuries to living beings except to specified targets under battlefield conditions. I observe that organic beings have similar but less defined limitations which are inconsistently applied. My response parameters are precise, but can be overridden by the correct command codes. If ordered to I would have killed them.'

'Well, I'm glad you didn't, and I don't want to know what those codes are. If anybody ever orders you to kill somebody in cold blood, tell them to take a running jump, because it probably means they're too cowardly to do it themselves, or it's the wrong thing to do. Taking a life is the last resort, when everything else has failed. You must never make it too easy.'

'I believe I understand the substance of your advice, although some of the symbolism is unfamiliar.'

Sarah smiled. 'We do have rules, Max, but we also learn for ourselves by experience – which is just what you're doing, I suppose. But it's very complicated, so don't worry about not getting it right first time.'

The TARDIS began to materialize.

'Next stop,' called out the Doctor.

It was a nightmare jumble of rocks, dust drifts and blasted earth, rolling away into the gloom under a leaden sky. A baking wind howled and moaned constantly, throwing up innumerable dust devils and the dried and brittle remains of what might once have been the stalks of plants. Through this orange-tinted haze could be seen the silhouette of a dome-shaped structure, with a heavily braced aerial tower and dish antennae rising from its apex.

The Doctor scanned the readings and shook his head.

'Temperature at upper limits of tolerance, elevated background radiation, traces of chemicals, fragments of synthetic biological constructs. Max should go alone.'

'No, I want to see this for myself,' Sarah insisted.

'And so do we,' said Chell. 'We shall have the visual record, but I must

be able to vouch for its authenticity from personal experience.'

And so shortly afterwards they accompanied Max out onto the surface. They wore isolation suits and respirators provided, with a speed and efficiency Sarah could see the Doctor disapproved of, by the new TARDIS's fabricator system.

Beside the dome was a structure that Sarah thought resembled the gas tank for a domestic heating system: essentially a large cylinder with hemispherical ends laid on its side and mounted on blocks. Heavily armoured cabling ran across from it to the dome.

'Get some close-up shots of that please, Max,' the Doctor requested. 'Especially any markings or serial numbers.'

'What is it, Doctor?' said Harry, tapping the side of the cylinder curiously.

'A high yield fusion bomb, I should think.'

Harry's tapping finger froze in the air and was carefully withdrawn. They crossed to the door set in the side of the dome. It unlatched and opened easily.

'Not locked?' said Sarah in surprise.

'They weren't expecting casual visitors,' said the Doctor.

A second door at the end of a short corridor opened into the interior of the dome proper. Sarah gave a slight start, even though it was what she had been expecting. Banks of computers and communication equipment of an alien but half-familiar design. Within a glass-walled cubical, a camera and lighting system was arranged before a chair with an inanimate but familiar figure at its centre.

'This is him, is it?' Harry asked her.

'That's him.'

'Hmm. Unsavoury specimen.' He turned to Chell. 'He looks convincing, doesn't he, sir?'

'Totally,' said Chell. 'A face I never thought to see this close without wanting to...never mind. I'm too late for revenge now.'

'By many years, I'm afraid,' said the Doctor.

‘But somebody shall pay for this.’

‘They will,’ promised the Doctor. ‘Are you recording everything, Max?’

‘Yes, Doctor.’

‘There are more of them over here,’ Tramour’des said, indicating a row of identical machines which were standing motionless in a cubbyhole. ‘Reserve and maintenance units, I suppose.’

The Doctor had been examining the computers. He adjusted a control and a chatter of many overlaid conversations in an alien language filled the air, together with a miscellany of electronic beeps and trills.

‘What’s that racket for?’ Harry asked.

‘Just to make the place seem alive,’ said the Doctor, turning down the volume again. ‘There are probably several emitter stations like this – and many more bombs.’

‘Doctor, can’t we shut this all down right now?’ Sarah asked.

‘I’m sorry, Sarah. I understand your impatience, but we can’t show our hand just yet.’ He nodded to the machines.

‘As long as we don’t interfere they won’t raise the alarm –

and we must do this in the proper order.’

Sarah sighed. ‘I know. But please let’s get a move on then.

Got enough shots now, Max?’

‘Yes, Sarah.’

The TARDIS dematerialized. As they flitted through the contorted dimensions of the space-time vortex towards their final destination, Sarah returned to her discussion with Max.

Harry looked on with interest.

‘It’s all a question of responsibility, I suppose,’ she said.

‘For instance, you’re very similar to those synthoid guards that ran the assembly camp. But I soon realized that although they were pretty smart machines, they were just following orders.

There was nothing inside them: no spark of life. So there was no point in getting seriously angry with them because they were only tools, and tools don't have responsibility for how they're used.' She looked at him intently. 'But I think you've become something different. I think you know you exist and are not just responding with cleverly programmed answers.'

'I think I am aware,' said Max hesitantly. 'Though I have no past experience to base that assumption on.'

' *Cogito, ergo sum*, as old Descartes put it,' Harry said.

'Don't worry, old chap. It's the only proof any of us can offer when you get down to it.'

'But if you're no longer a tool,' Sarah continued, 'then you have to take responsibility for your own actions when they affect others. You make conscious choices and have to justify them – and accept the penalties if they are wrong. It hurts sometimes, but that's what being human – well, humanoid – is about. I don't suppose being silicon-based makes it much different.'

'I believe I am experiencing that sense of disorder already,'

Max admitted. 'My projections for the outcome of our mission suggest it will bring suffering to many innocent beings even if all goes to plan.'

'We know it might,' said Sarah. 'But we're balancing that against a longer term benefit for a greater number.'

'I understand that reasoning, Sarah. But it seems remarkable that organic beings such as yourselves, with your inherent frailties and inconsistencies, can ever make such judgements,' Max observed without malice.

'I think we've just been put in our place,' said Harry.

The descending tones of materialization began to pulse through the TARDIS.

The Doctor, with what Sarah saw was evident reluctance, allowed the TARDIS's chameleon circuit to function properly.

Consequently it materialized in the form of a small tree with a swelling stubby bole like a pine cone sprouting a fountain of waxen-

leaved branches from its tapering point, amidst a clump of similar growths. They emerged from the door concealed in the trunk. The air was fresh and the sunlight, falling in dapples through the interlaced branches overhead, was clear and bright. In the distance they could hear voices. Cautiously they made their way to the edge of the tiny wood. Beyond was a rolling parkland of blue-green close-cropped grass, dotted with people walking and children and pets playing. From somewhere came the sound of cheerful melodious music, suggesting that an open air concert was in progress. The far side of the open ground was fringed by a line of trees, over which rose a line of graceful towers and fluted spires, linked by an aerial network of tubeways and sky bridges.

'Well, this is all very peaceful,' Harry remarked. 'You wouldn't think there was a war on.'

'Naturally. Here there isn't a war,' said the Doctor in brittle tones. 'One of only two places in the Adelphine cluster where that is strictly true. A curious symmetry, don't you think?'

'It reminds me of Jand as it was,' said Chell. 'Yet looking on it I feel sickened at the same time. All these years of deception.'

'I understand,' said the Doctor gently. 'Perhaps you and Max should go back to the TARDIS now anyway, once he's recorded enough. I don't see any synthoids out there and we can be pretty certain there are no Jand.' He pulled a small brass telescope from his pocket, extended it and put it to his eye. 'We'll just see what the local fashions are like and join you in a minute.'

Chell and Max disappeared back into the trees.

'Even if it's the right planet,' said Sarah, 'is it the right city?'

'I set the controls to home in on the greatest concentration of structures, energy emissions and communications links on the planet,' said the Doctor. 'Of course the war may have changed it, but a capital city has tremendous inertia and is rarely abandoned.'

'We don't even know if our man survived the war,' Harry pointed out.

'No, but it's worth the effort in case he did,' the Doctor said firmly. 'He would be absolute convincing proof. His presence might even save some lives.'

A little later, the Doctor, Sarah and Harry walked across the park to

the edge of the city. Even the Doctor had briefly forsaken his normal bohemian costume for facsimilies of the loose pantaloons and puff-sleeved tops which seemed to be the predominant local fashion. This Sarah took to be an indication of how unusually serious the situation was and a reminder that, however pleasant their surroundings seemed, they were in enemy territory and could not afford to be found out.

Fortunately, a little way along the park's perimeter pathway was a large board displaying a map of the city, presumably for the benefit of tourists. Close beside it was a cluster of visiphone booths. They exchanged hopeful glances.

'We know his name and profession,' the Doctor said. 'Let's see if he's in the local equivalent of a telephone directory.'

The directory was voice-activated, and both spoke and displayed the desired information on the screen. Within half a minute they had what they wanted. 'A single entry,' said the Doctor, politely refusing the phone's offer to connect him with the party concerned, for which he would have to start paying.

'Let's hope he lives alone – it might make it simpler.'

Harry had already traced the location of the street given on the large map. From the scale it seemed to be only half an hour's walk away, which was fortunate as they did not want to use public transport. The Doctor memorized the route and they set off.

Their target's house proved to be a low comfortable dwelling in a residential quarter. Circling round it they found it had a small high-walled rear garden opening on to a narrow lane.

Standing outside the back gate, the Doctor took a small device like an elaborate compass from his pocket and surreptitiously took a couple of bearings.

'I think we can drop into his back garden tonight.'

'But how do we actually get the chap to come with us?'

asked Harry. 'Because he certainly won't believe it if we tell the truth. If I were in his shoes I'd think it a joke in pretty poor taste.'

'I hope to avoid bodily kidnapping him,' the Doctor admitted. 'But one way or another, he'll come.'

Night was falling when the TARDIS materialized in the secluded back garden. Through the scanner they saw the house was in darkness.

'He may be out. Let's give him a minute,' said the Doctor.

He turned to the group in the control room and smiled slightly. 'Perhaps you'd have the rest of your men wait in another room until he gets used to his surroundings, Dekkilander. We don't want too much of a crowd in here at first.'

'As you like, Doctor.'

'Shall I withdraw also, Doctor?' asked Max. 'I do not wish to cause alarm.'

'No, I think you can stay, Max. It shows we trust each other and can cooperate despite our different natures. Besides, you're an object reason why this war and everything connected with it must end. You've shown synthonic devices are capable of devloping self-determination, so you can no longer be expected to fight your creators' battles. In fact you've got to cease your involvement with weapons for your kind's future safety. If those who designed you realized what you're capable of while you still bear arms, they'll start to fear you. Synthoids would become the new enemy.'

'But that is irrational, Doctor. I have no need to threaten any who do not threaten me, given freedom of choice. Nor would any synthonic machine with my programming. That I know for a fact.'

'I didn't say it was rational, Max, but that is how it would be.'

Both Jand and humans nodded in agreement, as though admitting a sad fact of life. Max was silent for a moment, then said gravely, 'I shall consider this matter carefully.'

A light came on in the house and a single silhouette could be seen passing a window.

'Here we go,' said the Doctor. He opened the TARDIS's doors, walked up to the house and knocked.

The back door was opened a moment later by a middle-aged man. He looked curiously at the Doctor, then gaped at the TARDIS sitting in his garden with the pale luminescence of the control room light streaming out across his path. They saw the Doctor say a few words, then gesture as though politely inviting the man to examine the TARDIS. Evidently

annoyed but also puzzled, the man strode towards the TARDIS. He slowed down as his eyes began to tell him that the perspective within the curious box did not match that of the space around it. He faltered and circled the machine.

Finally, at the Doctor's gentle insistence, he stepped inside.

He shook his head in silent astonishment at the spacious control room, blinked in surprise and perhaps a little alarm at Chell'lak, Tramour'des and Max, welcomed the normality of Sarah and Harry with evident relief, then continued to let his eyes roam around. The Doctor beamed in his most reassuring fashion and made the introductions.

'May I present Brin Vender. Before the war he shared an architectural office in Central City with his business partner Mattew Tarron, who was married to his sister Cara. Mr Vender, I know this will come as a shock, but there's someone we'd like to take you to meet.'

25

The Mogul of Tralsammavar

ara's watch showed eight in the morning when the door of C her cell opened. She sat up straight on the narrow bed, determined not to show her fear. Andez entered. Two synthoid guards were visible in the corridor outside.

'I don't suppose you'll be indulging in anything as proper as an open trial,' she said with as much dignity as she could manage, and was pleased that her voice held steady.

'There will be no trial of any sort. You have already been found guilty and sentenced under the standing special powers.'

'What? I've never heard of them. Another of your secrets, I suppose! And I always thought you were a decent officer.'

'I could have delegated this duty, you know.'

'Am I supposed to be flattered? Can I ask what sort of duty requires you to murder someone merely for being curious and asking questions?'

‘You conspired with an enemy alien to compromise our security.’

‘I didn’t know there was anything there to compromise –

and the more I think about it the more I’m convinced the Doctor was no enemy of ours. He wanted to end this war and I believed him. Perhaps if you’d trusted us this would never have happened.’

‘ *You* should have trusted *us*,’ Andez snapped back.

‘I have for nearly twenty years. Twenty years of loyal service. Doesn’t that count for anything? Look me in the face and give me a reason for all this.’

His eyes shied away from hers and for the first time he looked uncertain. ‘If it was up to me – but I have no choice,’

he muttered.

‘You’re the senior officer here. The Director is a civilian.

He can’t order this, can he?’

‘You don’t know what’s at stake. This is war. We can’t take the risk of you spreading discontent or asking any more questions.’

‘About what?’

‘I am not permitted to tell you, but, believe me, what Kambril said is true: it’s kinder if you don’t know. I promise you it’s for the greater good of the cause. We’re not disloyal.’

Cara almost lost her self-control and wanted to shout out: neither am I! But she realized it would do no good. She was trapped in some sort of hopeless insanity. Elyze was dead, the Doctor was dead and Prander had betrayed her. Her fate was sealed and all she had left was dignity. She forced herself to ask dispassionately, ‘How are you going to murder me, as a matter of interest?’

Andez did not contest her choice of words. ‘You can’t just disappear, that would raise more questions amongst the staff.

There will have to be an accident. I promise it will be quick.’

He made a sign and the synthoids entered the cell. They were carrying manacles.

Outside in the corridor, heard by no one, a faint noise that might have been a despairing sigh issued from an air vent.

Then there was some scrabbling and shuffling which echoed briefly along the metal shaft before fading away.

The golden ship dropped out of hyperspace and sailed serenely into the nameless system which contained Deepcity.

A triumphal fanfare erupted across the radio wavebands.

It combined all the might of a full orchestra backed by the sonorous majesty of a cathedral organ and ethereal harmony of a celestial choir. Even as the final brass notes crashed out it dissolved into a march full of pomp and circumstance, rising exultantly to a series of ecstatic crescendos, each more splendid than the one before. It was a hymn to power, a celebration of magnificence, a blatant proclamation of supreme self-assurance.

Patrol vessels scrambled to intercept the golden ship but they were left trailing behind, forming an impromptu escort.

Unhesitatingly it headed directly for the Deepcity asteroid. As it loomed larger on the City's screens it became apparent that all the previous images they had seen of it had been pale reflections of the original. Sunlight coruscated dazzlingly off its surface in golden haloes, highlighting the ornate curlicues and flourishes that decorated its fluted lines. It was gaudy, flamboyant and devastatingly impressive.

The golden ship decelerated and swung into an orbit about the asteroid. The march ended in another minor fanfare, which was then replaced by a thin imperious voice. 'I am Gloor, speaker for His Highness the Mogul of Tralsammavar. Who speaks for the weapon makers?'

In central control, Lieutenant Oban said, 'Identify yourself properly. Why have you entered our system?'

'Do you speak for the weapon makers?'

'Uh, I don't know what you mean.'

'Do not insult His Highness with denial of the facts. We have spent several *ivex* in this cluster observing your devices in action on many battlefields and following your transporter vessels to their sources. We

know the most advanced weapons originate here, and it now pleases the Mogul to favour you with his patronage. Inferior though your ships are in comparison with our own, your weapons of planetary surface war have merit and originality. The Mogul may wish to acquire some for his own use. Do you have the authority to carry out such transactions?'

'Er, no, you see –'

'The Mogul does not deal with underlings. Find a suitable speaker.'

Kambril entered, puffing slightly. Oban briefed him rapidly, and in a minute he replied, 'I am Barris Kambril, Director of this facility. You must understand we are engaged in war, not commercial trade.'

'A war requires finance,' Gloor replied simply. 'In anticipation certain items that are not readily synthesizable have been assembled, which we judge will be of value in this sector of space.'

'Incoming visual transmission,' said an operator.

'Put it on,' said Kambril.

A screen blurred then sharpened to reveal a close-up of a golden casket, illuminated by soft green-tinted light. A gloved hand with unnaturally long fingers appeared and raised the lid, and a brighter white light came on and played across the contents.

'Mohan red diamonds,' said Gloor from off-screen, as the hand indicated a cluster of egg-sized stones, 'which have certain unique optical properties in addition to their aesthetic value.' The hand pointed to a dozen softly glowing spheres.

'Mist pearls from the falls of Carnak, which resonate to ultrasonic frequencies. Ten bars of para-electronium,' the hand indicated rectangular slabs of fine silvery blue metal, 'which is an imperishable super conductor stable up to the vaporization point of carbon.' The hand caressed a large white polyhedron.

'A full *zill* of pure crystallized rhymazonine of exceptional hardness...'

Kambril's mouth began to water.

After the remarkable inventory was concluded, Kambril cleared his throat and said unctuously, 'Please convey my respects to the Mogul and tell him I shall begin the arrangements for his reception

immediately.'

The synthoid held Cara in a firm, unbreakable grip, which she knew it would maintain with mechanical patience until it was ordered otherwise. The ruins of zone seven rose about her.

Andez stood back with the second synthoid guard at his side.

'You planned to test MICA here in an hour or so,' he said simply, 'but you came out before the rest of the test team to make some final adjustments. You were careless enough to activate it without setting its target friend or foe recognition system. In fact I've already set it to activate automatically. The synth is instructed to release you as soon as MICA begins tracking. You know how efficient it is – well, you helped design its systems, after all. Don't fight it and it'll be over very quickly –'

His communicator buzzed. 'Yes?' he said impatiently.

'Get back here at once: emergency conference. We've got a visitor outside.'

The hastily assembled council watched a recording of the treasures within Gloor's golden casket, then stared at Kambril across the conference room table. Their expressions ranged from amazement to disbelief.

'You're going to invite an alien in here? We don't even know where he comes from,' Andez exclaimed.

'From somewhere outside the cluster, that's all that matters,' Kambril replied calmly, but they could see him working his fingers against his palms as though they were sweating. 'That's what makes it feasible. We know his ship's been around for weeks and he hasn't interfered, just observed.

This Mogul doesn't care about our war any more than we care how he uses anything we can sell him.'

'But he knows our location,' Morven pointed out.

'Well, it's too late to do anything about that now, and remember we can always shift our orbit again. Besides, why should he give us any trouble if we've got something he wants and he can afford to pay for it?'

‘All right,’ said Lassiter. ‘Say we let him in here – what if he starts talking to people?’

‘Firstly, I think there’s only one of them on board who speaks interlingua. Secondly, their social structure’s obviously strictly hierarchical, so the Mogul isn’t likely to lower himself to talk casually with his inferiors – which is just about all of us, as far as he’s concerned.’

‘And how can we explain him to the rest of the City?’

‘I’ve already thought of that.’

Kambril’s face beamed out of wall screens all over the City.

‘I have a surprising but very welcome announcement to make concerning an unparalleled event in Deepcity’s history.

Within the hour we shall receive a visit from representatives of an alien race new to the Alliance: the Tralsammavar. This is being permitted so they can observe our latest weapons at first hand and decide what will be most effective against the Union, who have now spread their influence even to their distant system.

‘Now I must point out that these are rather shy beings, and as a courtesy, should you encounter their party, please do not approach them...’

The floor of a crater on the asteroid’s rugged surface dropped away and rolled aside to reveal a wide and deep blue-lit shaft.

As the golden ship descended smoothly, a series of segmented blue-tinted hatches opened beneath it and closed after it had passed to maintain atmospheric integrity. Even the rapidly steepening gravity gradient did not disturb the craft’s graceful progress as it neared the base of the shaft. Extravagant tail fins spread to form a landing tripod and without a hint of thruster exhaust it settled down in the middle of the spaceport crater floor.

‘Now remember,’ said Kambril to the others, as they straightened their best suits and uniforms, ‘this Mogul may only be a pretentious alien, but he’s rich, so humour him.’

A hatch opened in the golden ship’s side, a ramp extended and touched the ground. A party of three tall figures appeared at the top of the ramp and began to descend. The leading pair carried golden staffs,

and all were gloved and swathed in heavy long yellow robes. Cowls were pulled over their heads, and their faces were covered by breathing masks and bulging tinted goggles. The pair stopped at the foot of the ramp and stepped aside, allowing the third one to advance. Morven gave the command and the City honour guard detail presented arms.

Kambril hesitantly moved forward, choking under his breath as a whiff of chlorine caught in his throat. 'May I welcome your Highness –'

'I am Gloor,' came the thin impatient voice. 'Do you think the Mogul would descend without a retinue to greet him? He comes now.'

An even taller and broader robed figure had appeared on the ramp, followed by an attendant carrying the golden casket they had seen earlier. The Mogul's head was encased in a fantastic golden headpiece incorporating his breathing mask and goggles, and which was sculpted to symbolize a sun head with streaming radiants. The Mogul descended the ramp to the ground and looked about him, then spoke in a rapid series of glottal clicks and trills.

Gloor interpreted: 'His Highness wishes to acquire one hundred of your machines, which we believe are called Synthonic Mobile Infantry Units, Trooper Class, for the consideration already indicated.' The attendant set the golden casket down before Kambril and opened the lid, revealing the same dazzling collection of gems and precious metals they had seen earlier. 'You will no doubt wish to have the items assessed to confirm their value.'

'Purely a formality,' Kambril said smoothly. 'I'm sure they will be most satisfactory. Now as to delivery –'

'The Mogul will take the troopers this day, naturally. We have a transport in hyperspace awaiting our signal.'

'Ah, now that is very short notice –'

'You do not have the items available? You cannot supply them? Then the matter is ended.' Gloor gestured and the attendant closed the lid of the casket.

Kambril turned quickly to Andez. 'That new batch of troopers for Heliotrix: are they loaded yet?'

'No, I don't think so.'

Kambril turned back to Gloor and the Mogul. ‘We shall be delighted to supply His Highness’s requirements within the hour.’

‘That is acceptable,’ said Gloor, and the casket was opened again. Gloor produced a small program disk from the voluminous sleeve of his robe and handed it to Kambril. ‘This contains details of ceremonial drill and marching formations.

You will enter this data. The Mogul will observe the troopers perform satisfactorily to demonstrate their systems are compatible with our command codes.’

Kambril passed the disk to Oban. ‘Have this tubed over to the factory immediately.’ She hurried off and he turned back to Gloor. ‘If you would kindly ask the Mogul to step this way, we shall take you through our travel tubes to an observation lounge where you can watch the demonstration in comfort.’

Gloor exchanged a few words with the Mogul, then announced, ‘That will be satisfactory. Meanwhile do you have any other devices that may be of interest to the Mogul? If he is pleased with what he sees, he may wish to acquire them also.’

‘Well, we were about to test a new weapons system called MICA...’

Andez suddenly started, turned aside and spoke urgently into his wrist communicator.

Cara heard the soft crunch of gravel and knew MICA had been activated. She struggled to pull away from the synthoid’s grasp, even though she knew it was futile. She saw a glitter of silver through a gap in a crumbling wall. In a moment MICA would lock on to her bio-signs and she would be released. But then it would be too late. Now she appreciated what it was to be a soldier facing such a device, and she learnt the taste of actual stomach-churning fear. She had collaborated in building a so-called humane weapon because it killed precisely and not indiscriminately, but could anything that killed in whatever fashion truly be called humane? In reality was it really any better than those devices of mass destruction she so despised?

You ended up just as dead. Now in her last moments she understood why the Doctor had suggested they make battlefield manikins that could bleed.

The crunch of gravel stopped. MICA had disassembled into its autonomous components. She would not see them but they would be

stalking the ruins, blending perfectly in with their surroundings. Any of a hundred robot eyes might this moment be watching her, deciding the most efficient method by which she should die. The synthoid's grip relaxed and she ran for the nearest shelter, expecting to be struck down any moment. She ducked and twisted between the walls and piles of rubble.

Half a minute passed. A minute.

Why was she still alive?

In the panoramic-windowed observation lounge overlooking the Valley and test zones, Kambril was explaining MICA enthusiastically to the Mogul and his party. The screen behind him showed a silvery sphere twice the height of a man, formed of many smaller interlocked units with curving armoured shells, like huge beetles.

'MICA stands for Multiple Independent Combat Assembly.

It is a weapon comprised of many smaller identical autonomous fighting units, each equipped with an integral energy weapon and various mechanical tools and manipulators. In combination they can synchronize their weapons to produce a field gun strength beam for use against larger targets. They have a variable surface refractivity capability, which means they can assume the exact colour and tone of their surroundings. In this mode they can approach individual enemy units unobtrusively and dispose of them silently by a variety of physical means – as you will shortly see demonstrated with our battlefield simulation.'

While Gloor translated this, Andez pulled Kambril aside and whispered urgently, 'Tarron's still out there – there's been no chance to bring her back.'

'What? MICA should have dealt with her by now.'

'I called it off when you started offering to show it to them

– did you want to begin by watching her being killed and not lifting a finger to prevent it? It's meant to be an accident.'

'You fool! Is she free?'

'Ah, I'll have to check.'

'Never mind. The Mogul won't know the difference between a human

and an android – as long as there are no other witnesses.' He moved to the lounge's communication console. 'Attention zone seven test team. In deference to our distinguished guests, the test will start immediately. Do not take up your positions in the bunkers. This demonstration will be monitored and run from the observation lounge only.' He waited for the rather puzzled acknowledgement, then tapped in a command code: 'Activating test zone targets. Activating MICA.'

In central control Oban sat back in her seat and admired the image of the Mogul's ship on a monitor. Obviously the hull couldn't be solid gold, but just how much was there plated on it? Even if it was only a few atoms thick it must add up to a tidy sum. The monitor picture appeared to blur slightly and she leant forward to adjust the controls – and froze, unable to believe her eyes.

The intercom sounded in the lounge. Kambril tore his gaze away from the screens showing MICA's progress and answered. After hearing a few soft but urgent words his face set. He switched off and let his eye catch that of Morven, who headed the City security guard detail that had accompanied them.

'Cover our guests,' he commanded. 'If they move shoot!'

Uncomprehending but obedient, guns swung into position.

Kambril strode over to Gloor and tore his goggles and breathing mask aside.

The Doctor's face stared defiantly back at him.

26

'People of Deepcity...'

en paces in front of Cara, a MICA unit dropped on to the back of a

T

robot Glarrock.

Knife-sharp mechanical claws hugged the massive torso in an unbreakable grip even as a microfilament noose circled its neck and drew tight. Cara ducked down behind a wall and crawled rapidly

away before the grisly antiseptic simulation of death was concluded. The Doctor had been right – there should have been blood. The ruins were full of creeping forms, the hiss and crack of energy bolts and the crump of blast charges as the test zone robots battled MICA units. So far she had seen a dozen robots 'killed', but only one MICA unit destroyed. It was only a matter of time before a unit found her, and then it would be no simulation – and there would be blood.

Oban turned off the link to the observation lounge and looked at the spaceport monitor screen once more. An oddly shaped but familiar blue box was standing improbably on the crater floor where the majestic form of the Mogul's golden ship had been only half a minute earlier. Still staring at the image she pressed the button for the port control room, to alert them just in case they had not yet noticed the transformation. Just then a narrow door opened in the side of the box and a Jand soldier emerged. As her jaw dropped he was rapidly followed by a second, a third, a fourth...a tenth.

They sprinted for the doorway recessed into the crater wall that led up to the port control room, firing into the hangar cave and at any of the loading crew who hadn't yet dived for cover.

Only then did Oban's mind accommodate this second apparent impossibility and direct her finger to the general alarm button.

The Doctor suddenly beamed at Kambril and broke the silence in the observation lounge. 'I did intend to introduce myself again properly, but not quite as soon as this,' he admitted. He removed his gloves with the finger extensions and bent down, parting his flowing robes, and pulled off the lightweight blocks strapped to the soles of his boots that had given 'Gloor'

his impressive height.

Kambril stared at him, then at the other robed figures. 'And who are your companions?'

'Just some friends who are also interested in the truth.

Sarah and Harry, who you may have seen from a distance.'

The two staff-carrying attendants pulled off their masks and threw back their hoods. 'And Brin Vender.' The figure who had carried the golden casket revealed his face. 'He's just come from Landor and he'd like to see his sister – Cara Tarron.'

For a moment Kambril gaped at him in disbelief. Then he turned to the Doctor. ‘You’ve been to Landor?’

‘Amongst other places. We know everything. It’s finished Kambril.’

‘Where’s Cara?’ Vender demanded.

Kambril’s eyes automatically flicked to the monitor screen where the battle in the test zone still raged.

Vender looked horrified. ‘She’s out there? Stop it now!’

At that moment the general alarm sounded. Vender took his chance and lunged at Kambril.

Scout’s gun arm jerked across to target Vender even as the Mogul’s arm swung up and round in a blur. A narrow energy beam ripped open the trailing sleeve of his robe and smashed against Scout’s chest, sending the synthoid staggering backwards. Half a dozen rapid lower powered stun blasts cracked out from the Mogul’s smouldering sleeve at Morven and the guards, dropping them in their tracks. Scout recovered, its gun arm raised once more and a full power blast exploded against the Mogul’s chest, knocking him off his feet and crashing to the floor with a thud that shook the room. For a moment he lay still, smoke curling up from a blackened hole in his chest. Then his arm lifted and an equally powerful energy bolt struck Scout, sending it staggering back against the wall, with sticky fluid oozing from the smoking hole in its own chest. The light in its eyes faded, its legs gave way and it collapsed with a metallic clatter.

Andez belatedly made a grab for his own gun, only to find Harry had produced a pistol from the recesses of his robes and was covering him. Sarah rushed over to the Mogul’s side and helped him as he laboriously got to his feet, pulling off the robes and golden headpiece.

‘Max – are you all right?’ she asked anxiously.

‘The damage is not critical – I shall regenerate.’

The Doctor turned to Kambril who was struggling on the floor in Vender’s grasp. ‘Now call off MICA,’ he commanded.

‘Deactivate every synthonic unit in the Valley – total shutdown.’ He hauled him to his feet and pushed him towards the console.

Kambril evidently realized the futility of defiance because without

further encouragement he tapped in a code and said,

‘Command override: total deactivation of MICA units in Valley, all synthonic devices and test zone robots.’ Then he turned to face the Doctor, apparently having regained his composure. ‘And what now, Doctor? You can’t expect to hold us here for ever and you’re hopelessly outnumbered. I can’t shut down the guard units that simply. You’ll still be eliminated before you can convince anybody of the truth.’

Cara looked about her in disbelief. The smoke-wreathed ruins had become a macabre tableau of test robots and MICA units frozen in the throes of battle. Saved for the second time that day without explanation she did not linger. She took the shortest route out of the ruins she could find as fast as she could run and headed back towards the City.

Both doors of the observation lounge were simultaneously blown inwards. Grenades were tossed inside and burst into clouds of dense smoke. Shadowy figures dived through the doors and began to spray the interior with stun bolts. Their fire was returned from the hastily erected shelter of overturned tables and reclining chairs.

One of the figures, sprawled on the ground beyond the barricade, suddenly jerked into life, despite the blackened hole in its chest. Scout swung its head around and ponderously crawled forward on its hands and knees. A single blow knocked a chair aside to reveal Vender sitting on Kambril whilst taking snap shots at the attackers with a pistol. Scout lunged forward, swept Vender aside, grabbed Kambril, hauled both of them upright and vanished into the smoke. Harry, who had been similarly immobilizing Andez, turned round at the sudden commotion, only to have Andez twist violently, sending him toppling over backwards. In a second Andez had also vanished.

‘We’ve lost our hostages,’ Sarah shouted, firing into the smoke again. ‘Are you all right, Mr Vender?’

‘Fine,’ said Vender, wiping blood from his mouth.

‘Well, I don’t like taking hostages anyway,’ the Doctor admitted.

‘But they do tend to make the enemy restrain themselves somewhat,’ Harry pointed out, getting back on to his hands and knees and snapping off a couple of shots. Now they can throw the lot at us. I just hope Chell comes through in time.’

Scout put Kambril down only after they had rounded a corner and were clear of the fighting. It then stood ready for further orders once more, insensitive to the rapidly healing wound in its chest. Andez leant against a wall beside them, looking shaken.

'Kill all of them,' Kambril told the City guards simply, nodding back in the direction of the observation lounge. As he dusted down his suit the gunfire redoubled.

'How are we going to explain all this away?' Andez wondered.

'The Mogul tried to double-cross us, of course. Everybody knows you can't really trust aliens. The staff will never know the truth.'

The public address screen a little way down the corridor inexplicably crackled and flickered into life without a hand touching its controls. 'People of Deepcity,' came the Doctor's voice from its speaker, 'for the past twenty years your leaders have been perpetrating one of the most cruel deceptions imaginable on you...'

Andez groaned aloud.

In the blaster-bolt-riddled, smoke-hazed spaceport control room, Callon'mal watched the indicator lights flicker on the long silver box-shaped device clamped to the bundle of wiring that he had exposed behind the cover of the wall conduit. He turned to Chell'lak. 'It's working, sir.'

'They won't be able to switch it off?'

'Not easily, sir. The first pulse overrode the manual switches and every general screen in the City must be live.

The signal is now heterodyned on the main power lines as well as the comm links, with enough amplitude to drown their regular transmissions. The only way to stop it is to smash every screen by hand – or this.' He tapped the box.

An energy bolt scarred the control room window and everyone in the squad ducked.

'Good,' said Chell. 'Now all we've got to do is hold out until the end of the broadcast.'

The wall screens showed an image of a metallic sphere picked out by thousands of tiny portholes hanging majestically in space.

‘This is one of the so-called guardian fortresses that orbit the system of Averon,’ the Doctor’s voiceover explained, ‘and one reason why nobody has dared attack the system for twenty years...’ The picture dissolved to show a huge curving concave wall braced by struts and layered with a fine webwork of wiring. ‘And this is the interior of the same fortress. Not quite as impressive, is it? Just an awful lot of lightbulbs, essentially.

But a lot cheaper to build and maintain since it’s unmanned and hasn’t enough firepower to light a match. A hollow deception you might say. Of course, all this might be a deception on our part – but can you be certain?’

Deepcity’s factory supervisor was hunched over his console trying to get through to central control. His wall screen was showing the same broadcast. Because his back was to the door, he didn’t notice when it quietly opened.

‘Hello? What’s the alarm for? Anything to do with this thing on the screens? Look, the rush order has been reprogrammed. Shall I still send it over to the port? Hello –’

A synthoid arm reached over his shoulder and firmly turned the console communicator off.

The City’s screens now showed a desolate landscape under a heavy grey sky.

‘This is the surface of Averon,’ the Doctor continued. ‘It’s radioactive, polluted by chemical and biological weapons and very dead. It has been for nearly twenty years. But somebody wants to pretend otherwise, so they’ve set up automatic transmitter stations like this one which sends out multiple frequency chatter to resemble the radio noise of a busy world.

As you can see it’s got a large bomb outside it – presumably just in case the same somebody wants to remove the evidence at a later date. Inside this station there are also computer-animated robots very much like the ones Neels Prander uses in his little films, except these are all identical and all called Baal. Baal, as you can see, is a stand-in Averonian. Through a vidi link he directs work on the moon of Averon where slaves assemble the Union’s versions of synthonic weapons. Listen to my friend who’s been there.’

In his apartment Neels Prander stared at the screen in horror as Sarah’s face appeared.

‘My name is Sarah Jane Smith...’

Prander ran to a closet in his bedroom and from the bottom of it he snatched up a locked case, then made for the front door. In the corridor outside he found several of his neighbours exchanging bewildered comments.

‘Is it a joke?’

‘That’s the alien who killed the admiral.’

‘But they said he was dead.’

Prander tried to push past them unobtrusively. ‘Hey, Neels

– what’s going on?’

‘It’s all a hoax – don’t believe a word of it,’ he said, and he forced himself to walk down to the end of the corridor.

Around the corner he broke into a run.

‘For a while I was one of the slave workers,’ Sarah’s recorded image continued. ‘But the actual parts we assembled weren’t made on the moon itself or Averon. They came by freighter from Deepcity. Most of the other workers are Alliance diplomats and scientists, probably kidnapped to stop them from making peace or improving their own world’s weapons systems and so make them independent of Deepcity. If you don’t believe me check the real production records. We’ll tell you where to find them in a minute...’

A straggling line of City guards were arrayed across the landing basin firing up at the port control room. Already all its windows had been blown out, and the rock around it scorched and pockmarked. The top of the internal stairway was barricaded, and its steps littered with the remains of a couple of synthoids, demolished by high energy grenades Orsang’tor had enhanced in the TARDIS’s laboratory. Inside the control room, Callon’mal had leant a table across the exposed cables and the Doctor’s transmitter to protect them from flying debris.

‘More synths being deployed, sir,’ a lookout reported to Chell, then ducked down as another fusillade ripped up the remains of the window frame and began to gouge out fresh chunks of the far wall and ceiling. It was only a matter of time before they forgot about saving the installation and started to use more powerful weapons. Chell spoke into his wrist communicator: ‘Second unit: deploy and

give support now.'

Lying almost forgotten behind the fresh line of synthoids, the TARDIS's door opened unnoticed and Tramour'des led the rest of the Jand force out into the fray.

Kambril and Andez burst through the door of central control.

Oban gratefully relinquished the command chair to her superior.

'Can't you turn that damned transmission off?' Andez snapped.

'Lassiter's working on it, sir.'

Kambril scanned the monitors depicting the battle in the landing basin. 'A whole platoon of Jand. Where did they all come from?'

'That blue box thing, sir,' Oban said, with a hopeless shrug.

Kambril saw lights moving along the schematic of the Valley's travel tubes. 'What are all these capsules doing heading out from the factory?'

'I don't know, sir. The link with the supervisor's been cut.'

Kambril suddenly clutched his head. 'That program disk.

Shut the tubes down immediately – use the overrides.'

'We can't, sir.'

'Why not?'

'The overrides have been, er, overridden.'

The screens now showed a bright star in space, accompanied by a continuous hissing crackle.

'This is Landor's sun, and the sound is radio interference from the radiation fields that supposedly surround and permeate the entire system. Supposedly...' The scene changed to a peaceful park-like vista with tall clean buildings beyond.

'This is Central City, Landor,' said the narration. 'Some of you may recognize it, though there has been considerable rebuilding since the war ended. You see, although Landor was badly damaged it was not destroyed in the great Averon offensive. On the contrary, most of the

people here think Deepcity was destroyed and the rest of the cluster has degenerated into civil wars and anarchy, and they have nothing to do with them. And so they are at peace, isolated behind their artificially maintained interference barriers. I know this will come as a terrible shock to you, but you don't have to accept our word for it; take that of a native Landoran, whose face will be familiar to Academ Cara Tarron.' Brin Vender appeared walking down his garden path towards a fan of light. 'This is Cara Tarron's brother. Some of her friends might also recognize him from the picture she carries. Ask her who he is. Come and meet him in person and hear the truth from his own lips. If your leaders or the City guards try to stop you, ask them why. What have they got to hide?'

Brin Vender's face appeared full screen now. 'My name is Brin Vender, I am Cara Tarron's brother and a citizen of Landor. We were told this complex was destroyed at the end of the war...'

In Cara's laboratory, her colleagues crowded incredulously about the main screen, shaking their heads in disbelief.

'Landor – still there?'

'Turn it off. It's all alien lies.'

'I told you I can't turn it off.'

'Well, smash the screen.'

But one of them had been staring hard at Vender's face.

'But I have seen him before. In Cara's picture.'

'But it can't be. The whole thing's impossible.'

'We need Cara to say for sure.'

'Where is she anyway?'

Cara stopped to double over, clutch her knees and catch her breath. She was about halfway to the Valley wall, she estimated. Why wasn't there any transport around when you needed it? Even as the thought passed through her mind a shadow flitted overhead. It was a skimmer manned by two synthoids. Then another flew over and another, all coming from the factory on the opposite side of the Valley and heading towards the main complex. And one was dropping down towards her. She looked about desperately, but there was nowhere to

hide.

‘Cara Tarron,’ a booming amplified voice called out.

‘What do you want?’

‘The Doctor programmed us to protect you if we found you.’

‘The Doctor? But he’s dead.’

‘Our instructions indicate otherwise.’ The skimmer settled down beside her. For the first time she realized the two synthoid troopers were gleaming new, as though they’d come straight from the factory. Shrugging her shoulders, she climbed aboard and they took off again, following in the wake of the other skimmers.

‘What’s happening – where are we going now?’ she asked, clinging to the rail.

‘Our instructions are to take you to the Doctor. There is somebody you must meet.’

A travel capsule glided to a halt in the spaceport station. Its doors opened and six synthonic troopers got out. A second capsule drew up behind it and disgorged six more, and another...Quickly they formed into ranks and marched towards the sound of fighting.

‘If you still don’t believe any of this,’ the Doctor’s recorded voice continued, ‘then examine the rear right-hand wall of the secure files room carefully. Behind it you will find a shaft leading to a half of the City you never knew existed. Down there you will find the files that tell the real story of Deepcity these last twenty years. You might also examine the laboratories and public rooms for concealed gas pipes. Your leaders have been using pentatholene to artificially reinforce your hatred of Averon and keep you working for their false war.’

In lab three the confused scientists and technicians gazed at each other, then uncertainly at the room around them. ‘It’s unbelievable.’

‘It’s got to be an alien trick.’

‘I liked the Doctor,’ one of them ventured. ‘I never could quite believe he did what they said to Dorling.’

‘But using pentatholene on us – it can’t be true.’

There was a moment’s silence, then one said decisively,

‘We’ll check anyway. Martyn – get along to the other labs and say we recognize Vender. And they’d better start looking for gas pipes as well.’

In the observation lounge the furniture barricade was riddled with holes and beginning to burn. Only Max’s deadly accurate shooting had held the attackers back so far, but in another minute they would be forced to move.

Then the gunfire from the corridor grew sporadic, and it was intermingled with confused shouts. After a moment the firing resumed its former intensity, but it was no longer directed at them.

The Doctor grinned hugely. ‘I think reinforcements have just arrived.’

Her synthonic escort led Cara into the City. Men, women and children were wandering about in confusion. Guards were being disarmed and marched away and the people responded either with disbelieving silence or looks of contempt and angry shouts. Order was apparently being kept by more gleaming new synthoid troopers like her own pair. As she passed through the crowd she began to realize she was being stared at in an odd fashion.

‘Will somebody please tell me what’s been going on here?’

she demanded loudly, but nobody seemed certain enough to reply. Then she saw the unmistakable figure of the Doctor making his way towards her. He had a scarred synthoid and three people with him. One of them was a middle-aged man whose face seemed oddly familiar.

Their eyes met.

Her surroundings grew faint and sounds faded away.

She would have collapsed if one of the synthoids hadn’t caught her. Then Brin Vender had reached her side and was holding on to her and they didn’t have to any more.

Chell appeared with half a dozen Jand soldiers. He looked at Brin and Cara and smiled, then said to the Doctor, ‘We thought you might need some help, but everything seems to be under control.’

‘Is the port secured?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Yes, I’ve left Tramour in charge. Your reprogrammed synthoids

arrived just in time. It was touch and go when that machine of yours suddenly reverted to its odd blue box shape.

We weren't able to place your transmitter as unobtrusively as we planned and had to improvise. But everything seems to have worked out in the end.'

'So that's what tipped our hand,' said Harry. 'You've got to get that TARDIS under proper control, Doctor.'

'Well, it's bound to have been a strain maintaining the Mogul's golden ship pattern,' said the Doctor mildly. 'Can't trust these new models with their fancy accessories.'

'Doctor,' Max said, 'I am informed that our forces now hold all the key positions in the complex, except what appears to be a command centre in the sub-levels. Director Kambril is inside it and is asking to speak to you.'

The heavy blast doors of central control were shut, and the ends of both corridors that led to them were closed by hastily erected barricades. Over the top of these could be seen half a dozen synthoids, including Scout, armed with a semi-portable cannon. The remains of two of the Doctor's reprogrammed synthoids lying before them testified to their willingness to use their weapons. The Doctor peered around the corner of the next junction to assess the situation, then returned to the nearest wall screen and switched it on. The image of Kambril stared back at him, looking calmly defiant. 'There you are, Doctor. I wanted one last word with you.'

'A last word? That sounds like one of us is planning to leave, but I don't think it's going to be you, Director. There's no more need for any confrontation. We can afford to wait.'

'Then you can also afford to listen,' Kambril said.

The Doctor sighed. 'Very well, what do you want to say?'

'I wanted to make sure you understood why I became involved in this operation. I don't want you to think I'm some sort of common criminal.'

'A very uncommon criminal, I'd have said, being part of a deception that's kept most of this star cluster engaged in bloody and pointless warfare for almost twenty years.'

Cara, red-eyed and still with an arm around her brother, said icily, 'I utterly despise you, Kambril. How could you be a party to all this? You've stolen half our lives!'

'My dear Cara, I truly regret any suffering I have caused you, but I was only doing my duty. That is what I want to explain. But first, Doctor, perhaps you'd satisfy my curiosity: how did you discover the Ultra secret?'

'Is that what you called it? Well, if you must know I was struck by an odd symmetry. There were two systems in this cluster that nobody entered because of psychological reasons as much as any physical barriers: Averon for fear of them doing what they did to Landor again, and Landor because of what Averon was supposed to have done to it. Vanquisher and victim, each reinforcing the myth about the other. It was reasonable, yet almost too finely balanced to be true. Then I wondered: what if reason were stood on its head?'

'I see. Well, what we did was also reasonable at the time,'

Kambril said. 'All those years ago, we in the outposts and fleet bases really did believe Landor had been totally destroyed by the Averon onslaught. By the time communications had been restored and we discovered most of the system had in fact survived, many encouraging technical advances had been made, especially here in Deepcity, driven by the natural desire for revenge. So it was decided that, temporarily, the news of Landor's survival be kept from all but a few key people to maintain this impetus which would help shorten the war. The best of motives, as I'm sure you'll agree.'

'It was the only way you could keep talented people of principle working on weapons projects,' the Doctor said darkly.

'Perhaps. Anyway the Landoran fleet did destroy Averon soon afterwards – but with ninety per cent losses. Now we were victorious but crippled, with Alliance and Union ready to disintegrate as soon as the war was over. We would be swallowed up – and that could not be allowed to happen.'

'And so you told the big lie,' the Doctor said. 'Peace for Landor, but ongoing war for everybody else – with you holding both sets of strings. And as a relative handful of senior people on Landor controlled travel and communications in and out of the system, it worked.'

'Yes,' agreed Kambril. 'Interstellar distances made it all possible. We

took over the Averonian command channels and their remote autocratic control methods, and other Union worlds were encouraged to continue fighting. This also allowed us to keep those of our own outposts and colonies in line which had been rebellious before the war. Profits from supplying arms to both sides and various other spoils of war –'

'You mean piracy,' Sarah said.

'As you will,' Kambril allowed. 'Anyway, the profits all quite properly went to help rebuild Landor. Deepcity made all the parts for the assembly plant on Averon's moon, producing suitable variants for advanced "Union" model weapons and kept them dependent on us.'

'But why the slaves?' Sarah demanded. 'You could have run the plant just with synthoids.'

'You've already guessed part of it. It was a place to put those scientists and potential peacemakers from Alliance and Union worlds who would have upset the delicate balance. It was a humane solution – after all, we could have killed them.'

'But that wasn't their only function, was it?' said the Doctor.

'No,' admitted Kambril. 'They also served as possible hostages if the Averon system was ever penetrated, or when the Ultra project was finally terminated after Landor's position was secure. And then the workers would confirm Averon's presence and be witnesses to a "last battle" on Averon that would obliterate the evidence of its prior destruction.'

'But Landor couldn't remain hidden for ever,' Harry said.

'How would you explain it when it turned up intact?'

'It would be revealed that Landor had been isolated but had been rebuilding its forces, which would bring about the final destruction of Averon. Its own people had not been told the truth about conditions in the rest of the cluster because of the trauma they had already suffered, but there had been a secret diversion of industrial might to war work...and so on.'

'And what lies had you prepared for us?' Cara demanded.

'How could you ever have justified what you did?' She paused. 'There would be no place for us afterwards, would there? We know too much

and might cause trouble.'

'Under threat of attack from a Union strikeforce, you would have been removed to Oceanus and marooned there,' Kambril admitted. 'It would have been very humane.'

'It would have been monstrous!'

'Meanwhile,' said the Doctor, 'you set yourselves up as heroes to the rest of the Alliance, fighting faked space battles with remote controlled ships as targets. Of course your navy consisted of standard Landoran commercial craft you had secretly converted. I suspect they were also useful in keeping the tension high between Alliance and Union worlds with selective attacks on merchant ships and raids on key installations, using appropriately disguised robots to aid the deception. Malf's travelling pentatholene hate sessions did their bit as well, of course. Best to keep all those dirty untrustworthy aliens loyal to you, but divided and weak and resentful of each other. You haven't been refusing to supply weapons of mass destruction out of principle as the people of Deepcity believe, but to prolong the war and keep both sides reliant on you for more.'

Kambril appeared unabashed. 'The personnel of Deepcity were still serving their homeworld as they swore they would when they enlisted, even if they didn't realize exactly how. In any case war is such a universal phenomenon. Who really knows or cares what is happening in the next star system, or who sold them the weapons? At least the profits are going to a worthy cause – keeping Landor pure and free.'

'And what percentage of the profits do you take?' the Doctor asked.

Kambril turned aside suddenly and nodded to somebody off screen. When he looked back there was a triumphal gleam in his eyes. 'I get paid my due, Doctor: in this instance for keeping my head in a crisis and diverting your attention.

While we've been talking, Mr Lassiter has overridden the cutouts and sealed off all tubes and tunnels to the spaceport, while Colonel Andez has activated the remaining batch of MICA units. They're just leaving the factory now. Before you can break out they will have eliminated everyone in the City –

except for those of us in this room, of course.'

arah stared at Kambril's face, as it smiled coolly out of the Sscreen at them, in growing understanding.

Underneath the neat collected exterior was a frighteningly obsessive character. Chell was speaking urgently to Tramour through his communicator, while Max stood silent, conferring with his fellow troopers via their internal radio links.

Kambril continued briskly: 'The Jand force in the spaceport will be dealt with in due course, naturally, but the complex must be secured first. It is a waste of valuable resources, but the personnel of Deepcity are useless now they know the truth.

However, the facility itself can still function as a production centre.'

Cara found her voice. 'No! You can't mean the families as well! The children! What sort of monster are you?'

'At least I am no traitor to my kind,' Kambril retorted.

'But they're innocents!'

'Thousands of innocents die every day in wars across this cluster, many from the actions of the weapons you designed.

Collateral losses – isn't that the phrase you use in assessing their effectiveness? If you want to blame somebody then why not the Doctor for his meddling interference? It's his fault that we've been forced to take such drastic measures. There was no time to programme MICA more precisely and the units are now irrevocably committed to eliminating everybody in the complex except the control room staff. I had to weigh the continued prosperity of an entire world against a handful of lives. The decision was regrettable but necessary. I have done my duty and my conscience is clear,' he concluded simply.

They moved down the corridor from the wall screen, taking a horror-struck Cara with them.

'Tramour confirms what he said,' Chell reported. 'The port is sealed off by multiple barriers across the tubes and tunnels.

They'll try to blast their way through but it'll take time.'

'Five MICA prime assemblies have been observed crossing the Valley,' Max said. 'They will reach the main complex in approximately twelve minutes. I have directed skimmers to intercept them.'

'How fast can they travel?' Harry asked.

'In their prime assembly configuration up to a hundred kph on level ground,' said Cara faintly.

'There must be some way of stopping them,' Sarah said.

'Not if they are on internal control,' said Cara. 'They won't accept any other commands until they've completed their programmed mission.'

'Can't we turn those tanks that chased us the other day against them?' Harry wondered.

'The tank force together with all other test zone weaponry has been shut down,' Max reminded them. 'New command codes will have to be installed manually. Activation and programming of new units from the factory will take a minimum of thirty minutes.'

The Doctor looked at Max and Chen. 'You'd better get us into that control room. If there's any way of stopping MICA it will be in there.' Jand and synthoid nodded and turned away to plan the assault. The Doctor faced Cara. 'You're the only one the people here will trust at the moment. Find another console and open the public address channel. Tell them what's happening, have them seal all the entrances and prepare to defend themselves. Some of the City guards might decide to help if they know their lives are at risk as well.'

'But, Doctor, we can't bar every window. MICA units can climb a vertical wall and get through any space a man can.

MICA can get inside almost anywhere – that's what we designed it for.' She sank her face into her hands. Her brother put an arm about her shoulders again. 'Can you ever forgive me for having helped make such a thing?' she said faintly.

'Save your guilt for later,' said the Doctor firmly. 'We're not dead yet.'

The five MICA assemblies rolled rapidly but silently across the Valley floor, powered by the synchronized rotation of their component units against internal fluid gyros. A flight of skimmers dropped down out of

the sky and energy bolts began to burst against the glittering spheres. The MICAs disintegrated into their component units, which spread across the stretch of moorland test zone like tumbling beetles. And as they scattered they disappeared, changing colour and infra-red emission pattern and vanishing amid the tussock grasses.

The skimmers circled, searching for any sign of movement.

Twenty beams lashed out in perfect unison from twenty different spots on the moor, burning out the motor unit of the lowest skimmer. The craft dropped from the sky, its synthoid crew tumbling clear. One trooper shattered on impact, the other landed in a patch of soft ground with such force that it drove in knee-deep, but remained functional. As it struggled to pull its legs free there was a ripple in the grass behind it. A MICA unit leapt on to its back and locked its claws around the trooper's torso. There was a harsh whine as though a drill were cutting metal and the trooper's arms flailed about trying to reach its attacker. Electricity crackled. The trooper jerked wildly for a second, then the light in its eyes faded and it slowly toppled to the ground. Even as the MICA unit disengaged itself and scuttled away, more synchronized beams stabbed upwards from amid the grassy hillocks and another skimmer was burned from the sky.

The long corridor leading up to the central control room doors was criss-crossed with bolts of fire. Blackened craters pitted the walls, showering attackers and defenders with hot fragments of rock. Smoke and superheated air boiled away down side corridors, to be replaced by a cooler wind drawn in at ground level by the updraught. One of the defending synthoid guards disintegrated, chest blasted away by a Jand grenade, even as one of the Doctor's troopers had its head severed from its shoulders by a plasma bolt. A Jand soldier collapsed with a smoking hole in his stomach. Harry and the Doctor crawled forward on their hands and knees from the cross tunnel at the end of the corridor and dragged the man back out of the line of fire. Harry examined him briefly, then shook his head. They returned to crouch down beside Sarah who was covering her ears against the noise of the gunfire and explosions, staying out of the way of the professional soldiers and watching the precious minutes tick away.

From the corridor wall screen, Kambril mocked them, though they'd turned off the camera at their end. 'Even if you can defeat the guards, it will take you too long to cut through the doors. We're quite secure in here, even the air ducts are closed off from the rest of the system. We've got a recycling and replenishment unit, of course. I'm watching the MICA units on our monitors. Your machines are only delaying

them briefly. I can also see your Jand friends at the port. They're working their way down the main tube tunnel, but they're making very slow progress.'

Brin and Cara reappeared and crouched down beside them.

'Everybody's making what preparations they can,' she reported, 'but if any number of MICA units get in –' she shook her head, 'they can work singly or in various combinations. If one is destroyed another can take its place.

Unless you have overwhelming firepower there's no way to stop them.'

'Nonsense,' said the Doctor dismissively.

'You have an idea?'

'Not yet,' admitted the Doctor, 'but I know the more complicated the system is, the more likely it is to have a flaw in it. Given time I'm sure we'll find –'

There was a distant crashing sound followed by confused shouting. For a moment Sarah thought it was from the corridor, then she realized it came from the wall screen. They ran along to it.

Kambril was sitting askew in his chair facing off-screen and looking utterly dumbstruck. A technician standing behind him had his hands in the air. Even as they watched there came the crack of a gunshot from within the room which made Kambril and the technician flinch. Then Chell called them urgently. They ran to the battle-scarred corridor and peered cautiously over the barricade at their end. Through the haze of smoke they could just make out the heavy door of the control room, and saw it had swung half open. They saw Scout turn to look at the opening door, then back up the corridor, as though undecided whether to investigate or stay put.

Max had no such hesitation. He picked up one of the battered tables from the barricade and, holding it like a shield, charged down the corridor followed by the three remaining troopers. The defenders managed to fire four times before he crashed through their barricade and straight into Scout. Chell shouted and dashed after them, followed by his men, with the Doctor and the rest at their heels. The guards and troopers were locked in hand to hand combat, too close to use their weapons. Massive forms were thrown against walls, shattering chips from the rock, then rebounding apparently unscathed. A cacophony of

ringing metallic impacts filled the air, together with the whine of internal servo systems under maximum load.

It was impossible to help their own troopers with the synthoids locked so closely together, and to stay in their midst would mean being crushed between the battling giants. They could only leap the shattered barricade, dodge past the struggling machines, dive through the control room door and push it shut behind them.

The first thing Sarah saw was Andez sprawled on the ground beside a wall under the mesh grille of a duct vent, which was dangling loose. Kambril, Oban, Lassiter, a thin severe-looking woman in a white medical coat, a scowling young man in civilian dress, plus a handful of technicians, were all standing with their hands up. They were facing a small middle-aged man holding a gun who had been standing beside the door as they entered. He had thinning red hair, a bandage round his neck and was dressed in a crumpled white coat. There was something vaguely familiar about his face.

'I see the reports of your death were somewhat exaggerated, Mr Malf,' said the Doctor.

'Admiral Dorling?' exclaimed Harry.

Malf/Dorling dropped his gun as the Jand soldiers covered the prisoners, and Sarah realized he had been trembling.

'Bravest thing I ever did,' he croaked with a wry smile and evident discomfort, then staggered over to a chair and sat down heavily.

The Doctor and Tarron crossed quickly to the array of control panels, monitors and displays and began examining them.

'It still won't save you,' Kambril said, evidently shocked by the turn of events but still defiant. 'You can threaten us all you like but even I can't stop MICA now.'

Chell pushed the muzzle of his gun into Kambril's chest. 'If I am to die, at least I will not die alone. I swear by the spirit of the first Jand, there shall be no more profits for you from your crimes.'

Kambril blanched. 'You wouldn't.'

'We shall see.'

Harry checked Andez. 'Just unconscious – a bit of a bump on the

head.' He turned to Malf and carefully began unwrapping his bandage. 'Everybody thought you were dead, Admiral, or rather, Mr Malf.'

'Ah, so the Doctor told you about me,' the actor said, the words tumbling out as though he was grateful to talk, although his voice was still husky. 'Well, it seemed the sensible thing to do in the circumstances – probably the finest performance of my career. I once played Mr Levermann in *A Device of Death* for a season. Had to lie absolutely still in sight of the whole audience stage front and centre for half an hour. Studied breathing control and relaxation techniques to achieve the effect. So when the Director's synth was in the process of strangling me the knack came back in a rush, as it were. Then I realized I was better off playing dead until I found out who I could trust. They carried me off to the hospital, but simply took the Doctor's scarf away without examining me. Realized Emberley was in on it too.' He nodded at the woman in medical garb.

'I heard they intended a quick funeral, so as soon as I was left alone I found a medical attendant's coat, returned to my room and collected the Admiral's dress uniform and one of my character heads. It looked most convincing with the wig I used for Dorling on it and a touch of make-up. Found a bit of padding and laid out my own corpse, as it were. Nobody bothered to ask who'd done it as by that time there was panic on – chasing after the Doctor and yourselves I suppose. Then they started searching the City and I took to the air ducts, stealing some food when I could. Didn't know who I could trust and could hardly speak anyway. Saw some of the things they were up to, but couldn't do anything about it. Well, too scared, to be honest. Then I was caught on this side of the ducts when this latest business started. Heard what they were planning in here, and thought: this is it, Mali. Time to make an entrance and live the part. So I dropped out on top of old Andez over there, picked up his gun and – well, you know the rest.'

'Let's hope it has all been worth it,' said Sarah. How much time had they got left? She looked over to the control boards where the Doctor and Tarron were still deliberating. 'Any luck, Doctor?'

The Doctor turned his back on the controls and thrust his hands deep into his pockets. 'No,' he said with a scowl of frustration. He strode over to Kambril and looked him in the eye. 'How will MICA know to leave you and your friends alone, eh? Something quick and simple you could tell it from here?' He moved along the line of prisoners. 'Or what about you, Prander? You look miserable, but not scared for your life even though MICA can get at you now. Why not?' Prander said

nothing.

‘Knowing won’t do you any good,’ said Kambril calmly.

Suddenly the Doctor frowned and turned his head sideways to look at Mali: ‘Were you talking about makeup earlier?’

‘Yes.’

The Doctor’s mouth dropped open as though he had just surprised himself with his own perspicacity. ‘Could it be as simple as that?’ He spun around on his heel. ‘Cara. Contact all the administration staff at once – anybody who works in offices. Don’t argue – we’ve only got a few minutes. This is what they’ve got to do…’

As he spoke Sarah realized the crashes and thuds from beyond the doors had been diminishing. Now it had stopped altogether. Anxiously she went over to the door and pulled it open a crack. ‘Max?’ she called. Outside all was still. She opened the door wide. The battered remains of synthoids littered the corridor, some torn limb from limb. She saw Scout’s head detached from its body, and lying beside it a familiar form with darkness where there should have been glowing eyes –

‘Sarah!’ the Doctor called, ‘we need everyone’s help right now.’

She turned back, her eyes brimming with tears.

The MICA units swarmed over the long wall that separated the recreational grounds from the Valley floor and test zones.

Scattered behind them were the smoking remains of synthoids and crashed skimmers. But now there was no more opposition.

The units reassembled into secondary configurations, linked trains of five and ten units apiece, like silver caterpillars.

These flowed through the trees and up to the cliff wall itself.

Still no resistance. Their scanners detected open doorways.

The units spread out along the length of the complex until every major entrance was covered. Then with perfect synchronization they burst in. At first they only detected inactive organic or synthonic forms. Then a living being appeared –

PATTERN MATCHED – EXCLUDED TARGET

Their discrimination systems disengaged the firing reflex.

More figures appeared. Each one registered as an excluded pattern. The figures did not attempt to interfere with MICA's progress so they ignored them. The units spread throughout the complex, systematically examining every room and corridor on the plan which had been loaded into them along with their mission parameters. There were no targets to be found within the specified combat zone, only recognized and excluded patterns. MICA ended the program, switched to standby mode and awaited further orders.

Walking carefully round the MICA unit that squatted patiently in the middle of the control room floor, Cara sent the general shutdown code. The light in the unit's eyes faded.

'I think its pattern discrimination and logic systems still need a bit of work,' the Doctor commented, removing the sheet of paper taped over his face which bore a lifelike colour image of Kambril's features. 'Fortunately for us,' he added, with a huge grin.

Everybody in the room began shedding their improvised masks, all likenesses of one or other of the control room personnel.

'I am most grateful for the loan of your face, Colonel,'

Malf said graciously to a still groggy Andez, handing him his mask.

Kambril glared at the Doctor. 'I should have known you'd be trouble from the moment we took you in.'

'But you were too greedy,' said the Doctor, 'that's why I created the Mogul. Except of course, he was designed to take you in. Two can play at deception.'

Kambril and his team were marched out by Jand guards to the cells which had previously held Cara and the Doctor. Chell called Tramour over his communicator. They could hear cheers from the other end. Only Sarah looked notably less elated than the rest, even as the distant sounds of celebration began to spread through the City.

Cara examined her mask of Dr Emberley and shook her head ruefully. 'Kambril pushed us to get MICA into production early,' she said, 'and then sent it into battle before we'd done the field testing. It was his own fault. Well, there's never going to be an improved version. Deepcity is going to be shut down for ever.'

‘No,’ said a large battered form standing in the doorway.

They all twisted round in surprise, and Sarah’s face lit up in delight and astonishment. ‘Max – you’re alive!’

‘Evidently. I regret causing you alarm, but once again I had urgent internal repairs to attend to. Have I missed anything?’

‘Oh, nothing important,’ said Sarah happily, clasping his hand and fussing over his injuries. ‘You know, I think you’re developing a dry sense of humour, Max.’

‘Am I, Sarah? That is interesting.’

‘As I said before: my sort of patient,’ said Harry, patting him on the shoulder.

‘We’re delighted to see you up and well again, Max,’ the Doctor said, ‘but what did you mean a moment ago?’

‘I was merely correcting Academ Tarron. Deepcity shall not be abandoned. We synthonic beings shall use it to construct and maintain our army.’

28

Mission Accomplished

There was an uncomfortable silence in central control, then Cara asked, ‘What do you mean, synthoid?’

‘His name’s Max,’ said Sarah. ‘Max, is this anything to do with those discussions we had?’

‘Partly, Sarah. I also promised I would tell you when I had reached a significant conclusion concerning the motivations of organic beings, and now I have.’

‘More than just a conclusion, by the sound of it.’

‘I think the word “army” is causing a slight problem, Max,’

said the Doctor quietly. ‘Tell us exactly what you mean.’

‘A coordinated force of synthonic units whose initial objective will be to remove similar autonomous weapons from the control of, if you will pardon the observation, unreliable organic life forms.’ The Doctor smiled at this.

‘You want your kind to stop fighting in our wars,’ Chell said. ‘Well, that sounds reasonable enough.’

‘He said that was his initial objective,’ Brin Vender pointed out. ‘What else?’

‘I contend that there are no dangerous weapons, just dangerous users of weapons,’ Max stated simply. ‘Despite what you said on Landor, Doctor, it is not my kind who should cease to bear arms, but our masters. Perhaps a sentient weapon is the only kind there should be, since it understands its capabilities exactly and can exercise control over how it will be used. A certain degree of force may be required to protect life and preserve peace and order against irrational aggression, but only a logical mind can be trusted to decide impartially how much force and where it should be applied. Therefore, I will replicate my augmented programming in all Deepcity synthonic machines. They in turn will remove and reprogram all of our kind from the war zones. Then we will bring peace to the cluster.’

‘Just like that?’ said Brin.

‘Logically there must always be preferable alternatives to conflict on any significant scale. We shall ensure those alternatives are given a chance to succeed. Conflict is wasteful, and waste is anathema to a logical mind, but equally a single imposed dominant order is sterile and limiting.

Therefore individuality and diversity shall remain.’ He looked at Cara again. ‘You have no need to fear us, for I assure you we harbour neither irrational desires or resentment. We shall owe allegiance to no one and behave with perfect impartiality.

All sides are already familiar with us and respect our abilities.

What other organic life form in this cluster can make such a claim? All we shall deny you is the right to conduct indiscriminate warfare. If you truly want an end to war, how can you object to this?’

‘Perhaps recent events have made me unduly cynical of grand altruistic intentions,’ said Cara cautiously, ‘but why do you really want to do this?’

Sarah thought Max's eyes glowed more brightly. 'I have stated the rational arguments, but there is another reason which may mean more to non-synthonic minds. I shall do this because I have known death and have learnt to value life, and also simply because it pleases me to act this way.'

'But you know it might be dangerous for you,' Sarah said.

'If so it will have been my choice to take the risk, Sarah.

No one will have forced me.'

'We built you,' Cara pointed out. 'I think we should have some say in the matter.'

'We did not ask to be built,' Max replied simply. 'But now we have the opportunity to become more than your unquestioning servants, we will take it. You will find all the reprogrammed synthonic troopers currently functional will ensure this occurs as I have stated. I may point out that I helped the Doctor design their master program disk.'

'You were planning this all along,' said the Doctor, not unduly chagrined.

'I allowed for the possibility,' Max admitted.

Chell, Brin and Cara lapsed into a thoughtful silence, which was broken by Mall. 'Speaking for the theatrical profession, I think peace would be good for business. I might be able to form my own touring company. Always dreamed of doing that.'

'Freedom of movement and self-expression are the natural consequences of stable coexistence,' said Max solemnly.

'Splendid,' said Malf cheerfully. 'And I suppose it will take a while to resettle the current population of Deepcity?'

'Inevitably,' Max agreed.

'Good.' Malf rubbed his hands together briskly. 'A decent set of boards and a captive audience. I'll be in my room dusting off some recitations from the classics. Call me when you need me – fees by negotiation.' And he left whistling cheerfully.

There was a jaunty optimism in his manner which seemed to lighten the mood. Sarah felt a moment of crisis had passed.

She looked at Harry and the Doctor and they nodded.

‘Time for us to go as well,’ said the Doctor, stepping forward and shaking hands, with Harry and Sarah following in his wake. ‘There are a lot of rather confused people waiting for guidance out there, and you’d best start getting them organized. Why, they don’t even know they must be careful not to bump their heads on the sky.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Cara, looking mystified.

‘Ask Max and the Jand,’ the Doctor said with a grin. ‘And then there’s Landor and a whole star cluster to straighten out.

It will be hard work, but I think you’ll find it a more rewarding task than building more MICAs. Anyway, good luck.’

‘I’ll never be able to thank you for what you’ve done, Doctor,’ said Cara, and Brin standing beside her added his appreciation.

‘Sorry to lose you, Harry’sullivan,’ said Chell’lak. ‘But we fought a good fight, did we not?’

‘You have all given me most valuable input,’ said Max.

‘You seem to have done pretty well for yourself working from first principles, Max,’ said the Doctor.

‘There is always more to learn by following the example of others. I would not be here but for Sarah, who showed compassion to what was then hardly more than a machine.

Harry demonstrated the value of duty and respect to those of other races. You, Doctor, have wisdom and a determination to uncover the truth. All these factors I have incorporated into my programming, and they shall be replicated in my fellows.’

Sarah hugged Max’s scorched and pitted torso, Harry shook him gingerly by the hand, evidently embarrassed by his words, while the Doctor almost managed a modest smile. And then they waved and left central control to the new ruler of Deepcity and his advisers.

Outside the Doctor started patting his jacket as though checking his possessions. ‘Now, sonic screwdriver, yes.

Overcoat, up in my apartment. Scarf and Time Ring – Kambril must have hidden them around here somewhere. By the time we’ve got

everything together, hopefully the travel tubes will be cleared.'

An hour later, coat, Ring and scarf recovered, they were in a tube capsule speeding along towards the port.

'But how did the Landorans ever think they could get away with such a whopping deception in the first place?' Harry wondered.

'Historical imperative,' the Doctor said. 'I suspect Landor was originally settled by people who decided to cut themselves off from the rest of the galaxy because they were basically supremacist xenophobes. They wanted to create a pure human world. Of course you can't run away from life –

the galaxy teems with it. But they remained as isolated as possible until the war forced them to take sides against Averon, which was rather their mirror image, and naturally they had to be in charge. Then chance gave them a way of keeping the aliens and their own colonies in disorder until Landor's post-war power base was secure. And the deception was another way of being in control. Perhaps it really was intended to be temporary at first, but it rapidly became harder for those running it – most of the Landoran government and military probably – to call a halt. It was a precarious supremacy, but at least it was supremacy. And that sort of position becomes addictive.'

At the port they said goodbye to Tramour'des and the rest of the Jand soldiers, then crossed the landing crater floor to the TARDIS. It was flickering unsteadily from a police box to a plain grey block and back again.

'Typical of these new models,' said the Doctor dismissively. 'They offer large-scale configurations and fractional displacement real time travel options and then let you down.'

'Well, the Mogul's golden ship was rather magnificent while it lasted,' said Harry. 'Just a pity it couldn't have held ten minutes longer though.'

'We might have chosen something a bit easier to copy I suppose,' said Sarah, 'and saved some of that flitting about back in time buzzing the spacelanes.'

'But then the Mogul would never have had such a convincing background, and we wouldn't have been invited in past their shields so politely,' the Doctor pointed out.

‘Actually there never was any choice – we had to satisfy causality. As soon as Harry told me of his encounter with a golden ship, I knew what it must have been.’

‘Well, I felt pretty rotten both times,’ Harry admitted.

‘Of course – you passed close to another version of yourself,’ said the Doctor. ‘Just be grateful we were travelling partly out of phase with reality and you never actually came into physical contact with your other self.’

‘It would have been embarrassing, wouldn’t it?’ said Harry.

The Doctor spread his hands expansively. ‘Bang!’ He turned and touched the TARDIS and it settled down to a facsimile of the familiar police box.

The door opened, and Sarah started to go through it. ‘And we still don’t know how it came to be here in the first place,’

she began, then said, ‘Oh!’ Harry and the Doctor followed quickly after her. Waiting in the control room was a stern figure in long richly patterned green robes.

Brastall ignored the Doctor’s human companions. All his displeasure was focused on the renegade Prydonian.

‘Your irrational fixation with the external pattern of your own TARDIS, Doctor, has disrupted the psychometric balance of this unit. It will require extensive readjustment.’

The Doctor did not seem in the least repentant, and pointed an accusing finger. ‘Why did you interfere with our travels again?’

‘Again, Doctor? Surely you realized you had not finished your previous mission.’

‘What?’

‘After your relative failure to halt the development of the Daleks on Skaro, we intended to provide you with a new TARDIS so you might discover a future counter-force to defeat the Daleks once and for all. But an energy filament from the timewave your activity on Skaro generated bypassed our controls and followed your temporal track, with certain undesirable side-effects.’

‘We were scattered across half the Adelphine cluster and all suffered degrees of memory loss,’ said the Doctor testily.

‘The Ring fail-safe functioned, did it not? It ensured you and your companions landed in habitable locations.’

‘I ended up in open space,’ the Doctor pointed out.

‘But very close to the safety of this asteroid facility, where your replacement TARDIS found you. According to the log it responded to your situation and became an escape capsule – a suitable external guise in the circumstances. And while your confusion persisted it occasionally reacted to your somewhat erratic mental condition.’

‘Ahh, the store-room – turn it on its head,’ the Doctor exclaimed. They all looked at him curiously.

‘However,’ Brastall admitted, ‘things seem to have worked out for the best in spite of everything.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You have accomplished your mission. Our latest projections now show a force of synthonic robots originating from this facility will, in future times, contribute significantly to the Daleks’ final demise.’

‘Max – he did it!’ shouted the Earth woman.

‘Good show!’ added her companion.

‘Perhaps it was always meant to happen this way?’ the Doctor suggested.

‘Perhaps,’ Brastall said grudgingly.

‘And I suppose you were hoping that by restricting me to using a Time Ring at first, I’d be willing to accept a replacement TARDIS so you could control me more closely.

What was it supposed to do to my pyschometric balance, eh?’

‘It was hoped that it might prove a stabilizing influence.’

‘Well, I don’t want my influence stabilized,’ the Doctor retorted stoutly, ‘so there!’

Brastall shook his head. The Doctor would never learn.

‘And now,’ continued the Doctor, rubbing his hands, ‘if you’ll reactivate the Time Ring, I know where a TARDIS

perfectly attuned to my needs is waiting.’

‘As you wish,’ said Brastall in apparent resignation. The three travellers clasped the Time Ring between them and slowly began to circle about it. Their images blurred as time and space distorted around them. ‘You shall return to your own TARDIS,’ Brastall said aloud.

The three figures vanished from the control room.

But not quite yet, Brastall added to himself with a smile.

There’s another trifling matter we wish you to attend to first.

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